

CANTONESE WOMEN WORKERS & JOB CHANGE  
UNDER INDUSTRIAL RESTRUCTURING IN BOSTON: 1970-1990

by

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**ABSTRACT**

In my case-study, I have looked at the effects of the loss of garment jobs on Cantonese women workers in Boston in the 1980s under economic "restructuring." The basis for my study are the ideas that ethnic working-class women are especially vulnerable to changes in the labor market, that their jobs are closely linked to their other work as mothers and wives, and that their shared oppression in the workplace, the community, and in society provides a potential for political organizing.

From my interviews with laid-off Cantonese garment workers, I have found that they have entered the service sector, primarily in food service. There are opposite opinions about whether the new jobs are "good" or "bad" for the women. There is also literature that supports the argument that there are advantages in the garment jobs. I have found that the new jobs are part-time and unstable. I have also found that the increased time inflexibility in the new jobs reduces the ease of juggling a job with domestic work. Finally, I have found that the required use of English, the tension now felt with non-Chinese co-workers, and the reduced opportunity for gathering with other Cantonese women in the workplace and outside of work reduces the support network, the camaraderie, and the potential for development of "class consciousness" and political organizing for these women.

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## INTRODUCTION

### My Point of Entry

I am a Cantonese-American woman who has grown up in Boston's Chinatown. It was not until I attended college, and now, planning school that I learned about my community as an "ethnic ghetto" (or "urban village") and about the expected "success" trajectory of immigrant groups in the US. It has been difficult for me to wear these new lenses because I was put in a position of straddling two perspectives - one as a community member which is a more emotional link and the new one as an outside observer which is a more intellectual relation. Yet, I believe that my position enabled me to develop particular skills that bi-cultural people come to develop; in my case, I hope that I am able to better represent my community in the face of the many misinterpretations held about it. In doing so, I believe that my best role may be as an interpreter for others of my community.

Thus, when I saw first-hand the impact of larger economic forces on my community which is immigrant and in particular on a group of women (because of the division of work in the labor market by ethnicity and gender), I was interested in having the women speak of their experiences themselves. I was also interested in understanding the context to which their

experience refers.

In the 1980s, I witnessed many Cantonese<sup>1</sup> women workers from my community lose their jobs from the garment industry. The loss of garment jobs was on a disturbingly large scale. I heard that some of these women got other jobs at hotels as housekeepers and some "went to school." (I did not yet have the pieces to put together.) I wondered if they were going from one kind of job into another as a group and what kinds of new jobs they were getting. Since I knew that these women also had other work besides that at the job such as that in the household and other connections such as that within a social network in the workplace and in the community, I wondered what effects the job change had on these other spheres of their lives.

Are their lives "easier," that is, do they experience less stress and more benefits from this job change itself and as it affects their other roles? Or are their lives more difficult because of this job change? I tried to conceptualize the overall well-being of these women.

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<sup>1</sup>I will be referring to the women in my case-study as specifically "Cantonese" women instead of Chinese women in general because I want to distinguish them as working-class as the Southeastern Chinese have been historically.



## Context of Issues

These questions raise a series of issues. I have organized my questions into three issues and have integrated three fields of literature in order to answer the questions. (1) First, the most obvious and general question is what are the effects of the current economic change and industrial shift on the "vulnerable" groups in the political-economic system such racial/ethnic minorities, immigrants, and women? Since these groups are generally "labor," what are the effects in terms of jobs particularly? (2) Second, how do jobs connect with household and community for women, especially ethnic working-class women who have multiple characteristics that predispose them to multiple vulnerabilities? And (3) third, how do ethnic working-class women, who have these multiple vulnerabilities, organize in the workplace and in the community? And are these opportunities affected by the job change?

(Please note that in the rest of this paper I will be bolding or underlining text which is particularly relevant to my argument.)

First, however, with regard to the effects of "restructuring" on the general US workforce, Bluestone and Harrison have described four basic ways employers have "zapped" labor within the US border: they have cut labor costs through concessions; through a two-tiered wage system (with new employees

paid less for a longer time than the few stable at the core with seniority); through the use of contingent work such as part-time workers, workers under subcontractors, leased & temporary workers, and home-workers; and through union avoidance. (Bluestone & Harrison, 1988)

Standing and Christopherson agree that both the private and public sectors are increasingly using part-time, subcontracting, and temporary workers to reduce labor costs under the current economic restructuring. (Standing, 1989; Christopherson, 1988)

Standing also notes the development of "skill polarization" in the labor force with a few highly skilled at the top of the hierarchy and the increasing majority with negligible skills at the bottom which is accompanying the current restructuring. (Standing, 1989) Christopherson, as well as Bluestone and Harrison, note a "widening wage dispersion" in the US labor market. (Christopherson, 1988)

Given the increase in the use of contingent labor, the increase in skill polarization, and the widening wage disparity, the presumption that

"the long-term trend of industrial development would involve a shift from unregulated, informal labor to secure, regular employment" (Standing, 1989:1079; my emphasis)

is seriously refuted.

In the US now, nearly one out of five workers is a part-time worker and nearly two-thirds of these part-time workers are women. (Christopherson, 1988)

### Effects of Restructuring on "Vulnerable" Groups

(1) Regarding the first issue of the effects of economic change on vulnerable groups, Redclift and Mingione describe it this way:

"With the increasing mobility of capital, technological restructuring and labour saving have become world-wide goals, but they have a different impact, depending on region, sex, class, age and ethnic group...for minorities - the young, recent immigrants, women and the 'casual' poor of developing countries - the situation may be very different [than for skilled white men in industrialized societies]. The experience of unemployment and the ability to continue to produce some form of subsistence clearly varies in accordance with these categories." (Redclift & Mingione, 1985:8; my emphasis)

Indeed, "in some labour-market settings, certain groups may be vulnerable at both the employment and the self-provisioning levels...The fragility or resilience of survival is partly a legacy of the accumulation permitted by the past." (Redclift & Mingione, 1985:6; my emphasis)

So that, "in effect, within labor markets income security has been eroded, and economically and socially vulnerable groups have been most likely to suffer." (Standing, 1989:1078; my emphasis)

With the current economic restructuring, women and minorities continue to move into the most competitive, tangential, and short-term contracts (such as in catering). (Christopherson, 1988)

## Effects of Restructuring on Women

### A. Job Effects For Women

Standing and Christopherson are particularly concerned about the effects of restructuring on women in terms of jobs:

"More labor market flexibility implies implicit deregulation, and could be expected to lead to a widening of sexual earnings inequality."  
(Standing, 1989:1082; my emphasis)

And "semi-skilled, static jobs are reserved largely for women - but the disappearance of low-wage jobs at the bottom may hit the most vulnerable groups of all; impoverished, uneducated women are left to "crowd" into those jobs, pushing down their wages even further."  
(Standing, 1989:1087; my emphasis)

In addition, "what constitutes flexibility for employers does not necessarily equal flexibility for workers. And, men and women are differentially affected by the expansion of flexible work because of their different positions in the labor market and with regard to family responsibilities. These differences are manifested in a variety of ways but are exemplified by the limitations of the new job flexibility for women trying to combine home and work responsibilities"....but, "the newly available flexible alternatives, such as temporary work, are not predictable in the same way as permanent part-time work and thus are often less satisfactory solutions to the need to combine family responsibility with wage work." (Christopherson, 1988:14; my emphasis)

"Mothers of young children are left to find alternative - and probably costly or inadequate - child care arrangements. Or they may take informal, low-income work that can be combined with childrearing, or drop out of the labor force altogether. In effect, labor deregulation of this kind means transferring labor costs from the firm, or even the State, to the individual workers, most of whom are in the poorer strata of society." (Standing, 1989:1082; my

emphasis)

## B. Intensified Time-Use of Women

In addition to the job-specific effects of restructuring on women, Redclift and Mingione are concerned about the intensified time-use of women under the current economic restructuring:

"The analysis of possible combinations of time, income, skills, and resources as the main sources of organization for survival, shows that certain combinations of work can be highly prejudicial and problematic for some members of the household, even while guaranteeing their subsistence...Several recent cross-cultural studies have documented the different pressures on the time use of men and women, in which the latter have predominantly shorter resting hours, greater intensity and fragmentation of work and more frequent recourse to multiple simultaneous occupation...These accounts indicate that time has a different meaning for each sex, and economic change may affect the time use of men and women in different ways. They show that there are patterns of reproduction that are partly modified or subsumed by economic development and partly maintained. Economistic accounts that imply that the household responds only to economic pressure and rationality must be qualified by the evidence of the persistence of activities and forms of sexual division of labour as culturally valuable." (Redclift & Mingione, 1985:7; my emphasis)

Indeed, they cite that "much of the literature on developing countries argues that the over-exploitation of women is increasing with economic and technological change (Loutfi, 1980; Palmer, 1979; Rogers, 1980). The local context, household structure and domestic cycle are obviously crucial factors here." (Redclift & Mingione, 1985:8; my emphasis)

Redclift and Mingione suggest that the effects of restructuring may be seen in the following framework:

"What we are interested in here, however, are the contradictions that may arise as patterns of consumption come into conflict with

changing economic realities: opening options for some, foreclosing them for others, securing survival in affluence for a minority and making day-to-day subsistence problematic for many." (Redclift & Mingione, 1985:6)

### Ethnic Working-Class Women: Job, Household, & Community

(2) With regard to the second issue of the connections between the job, the household, and the community, we will begin with Nakano-Glenn's critique of traditional feminist theory. Given the experiences of Chinese working-class women, as well as that of Mexican and black working-class women in the US, Nakano-Glenn criticizes feminist theory on three counts: 1. ethnic working-class women have not had the finite distinction between private and public spheres in their lives as white middle-class women might have had because their husbands could not make enough wages to support the family. Ethnic working-class women worked in paid employment in addition to performing their domestic functions early on in history; 2. because the hostility in the host society was/is so great for the ethnic group, the primacy of gender conflict within the family in feminist theory is of less importance in the ethnic working-class family because the members required cooperation within the family in order to survive; and 3. ethnic working-class women have historically had jobs that consisted of providing domestic labor for white middle-class women often at the expense of their own families' care; even with the transferral of domestic labor outside the home such as with nursing homes for the elderly, childcare, and counselling services, the ethnic women

workers still get the worse of these jobs.

Despite these criticisms of feminist theory, for Nakano-Glenn, there are undoubtedly two-way links between the subordination of women in the family and in the labor market:

"The conception of women as consumers and reproducers affected them...depressing their position in the labor market. Women were defined as secondary workers, a status maintained by a sexual division in the labor market, i.e. occupational segregation. Jobs allocated to women were typically at the bottom of the authority hierarchy, low in wages, dead-end and frequently insecure. The secondary position of women in the labor market meant that women had little leverage to shift the burden of household work onto husbands, so they continued to be responsible for the domestic sphere. Moreover, because of the low wages and insecure jobs, even when employed, women remained dependent on the additional wages of the male earner (Hartmann, 1976; Kessler-Harris, 1982). This analysis has much to offer: it permits us to view women's subordination as part of a larger framework of economic exploitation. It also draws connections between women's domestic work and their work in the labor force, and shows how subordination in one sphere reinforces subordination in the other." (Nakano-Glenn, 1985:89; my emphasis)

#### Ethnic Working-Class Women: Job, Household, Community and Political Organizing & Activism

(3) Finally, with regard to the third issue of ethnic working-class women, development of a "class consciousness," and potential for political organizing and activism, Bookman argues that those who insist that women and immigrant women are resistant to unionization err, in part, from

"looking at the effects of patriarchy and sexual subordination only in the family context, where women are for the most part isolated from each other. In the workplace context, because of the sex-segregation

of production departments, women work collectively...and have opportunities for social contact with other women." (Bookman, 1988:174; my emphasis)

Speaking of the Portuguese immigrant women in the electronics factory,

Bookman observes that

"their common language, kin ties, neighborhoods, and other bonds gave them a cohesiveness as a group that most workers lacked" and that "their common culture was both a source of resistance to the inhuman aspects of factory life and a source of continuity with more humane social forms." (Bookman, 1988:175; my emphasis)

Bookman concludes that

"contrary to the findings of Fenton and others, ethnicity was a positive and significant factor in determining the receptivity of Portuguese workers, and particularly Portuguese women workers, to unionization. Rather than acting to obscure class relations, the maintenance of strong ethnic groups became the social and cultural vehicle for interpreting common class experiences." (Bookman, 1988:176; my emphasis)

Similarly, Berger observes that:

"for working-class women in South Africa, as for farm laborers in Kenya, female solidarity and class action have been mutually supportive" (Berger, 1986:218; my emphasis) partly because "even those women who did not have sole responsibility for generating household resources generally identified with their work roles because of a high level of economic obligation to their families, and particularly to their children." (Berger, 1986:219; my emphasis)

This "sense of heavy economic responsibility for their families that most women bear contributes to, rather than negates their class consciousness and their involvement in class struggles." (Berger, 1986:233; my emphasis)

Thus, "the economic pressures on garment workers, combined with a racially and sexually biased division of labor" (Berger, 1986:224)

have fostered a common identity for the black women and for potential



political organizing and activism.

Ackelsberg refers to ethnic working-class women in US cities and their potential for political organizing:

"As it is now, low wages and lack of access to jobs make women more dependent on public resources - for example, transportation and housing - than are men of similar class and ethnic background." (Ackelsberg, 1984:253)

This common dependence on public resources combined with

"the common activities of women in their building and neighborhood...all tend to create social ties that can provide a basis for mobilization' (p. 257). Kaplan argues that women met regularly at various communal spots (e.g. markets, water taps, and the like), which became important loci not only for the exchange of gossip, but also for political organizing." (Ackelsberg, 1984:251)

Thus, for women the community which consists of friends and neighbors constitute a locus for potential political consciousness:

"much of women's political consciousness and activities in urban contexts develop out of their participation in networks of friends and neighbors on a daily basis. Such networks tend to be 'spontaneously organized' (in the sense of lacking informal leadership structures), and non-hierarchical. Yet members can be readily mobilized, whether for help on an individual basis or to respond to broader community issues." (Ackelsberg, 1984:255; my emphasis)

In sum, "in Cockburn's words, 'women bring a totality, an all-or-nothing feeling in action. It is something of which trade unions and political parties with their hierarchies and agenda know little, and to which they can give little. This totality is not just of the work day but of the whole day, not just of wages but of feelings, not just of economics but of relationships' (1977b:69-70)." (Ackelsberg, 1984:256)

## Summary of Literature

From this literature we understand that the negative effects of restructuring most greatly impact the "vulnerable" groups such as racial/ethnic minorities, immigrants, and women. For groups that have a combination of these characteristics, the negative impact is probably even greater. This negative impact may take the form of complete job displacement or reduced wages, benefits, and security in jobs. The number of women in the labor force have increased with the increased job flexibility desired by employers for labor-cost cutting.

From the literature on the links between job, household, and community for ethnic working-class women in particular, we understand that they experience these links quite closely because of the low-income status of their households. These women must perform multiple tasks of earning a wage and performing domestic functions in order for the household to survive economically. These women also have close ties to other women in their community because of their common dependence on public resources and the male wage-earner in the household.

This shared subordinated experience in the workplace, in the household, and in the community is precisely what gives them the potential for political

organizing and activism, as has been documented by Bookman, Berger, and Ackelsberg.

Thus, the job change of the Cantonese women workers in Boston is not only an economic question in terms of jobs nor is it only a political question because of the wage/income effect from the job change, but it is also a political question in terms of the potential for political organizing affected by the job change.

We need to look at these three issues in the case of the Cantonese women workers in Boston.

### My Hypothesis

For the Cantonese women in my case-study, I hypothesize that their lives have gotten more difficult in terms of juggling their work as wage-earners, mothers, and wives and that they have lost the resource of being with their peers with the job change. I believe that the new jobs are more demanding of their time and therefor intensify their work-lives and that they no longer have the "ethnic enclave" experience that provided much needed support and potential for political organizing for these women immigrants.

## Relevance

If this hypothesis is true, then we can generalize about the implications of the current economic change for other similar vulnerable groups, particularly the triply vulnerable group of ethnic working-class women in the US. From this we can say what the current economic development implies for particular groups in the general economy and evaluate the path of economic and political development we are on.

## Methodology

The research methodology I chose reflects my position on the politics of research. I believe that fieldwork is immensely important because what informants themselves have to say is important and needs to be heard and presented carefully. Furthermore, although contemporary academia regards quantitative research highly, qualitative research is important precisely because it is political. Numbers by themselves don't protest as people do.

Thus, I interviewed Cantonese women who have been laid-off by the garment industry and have been reemployed by other industries to ask them about the changes in the job that have occurred, as well as changes in their household and social network spheres that might have also occurred because of the job

change. I wanted to find out whether the job change has been a positive or negative change for their lives as a whole.

### Contents of Paper

I have 5 "chapters" to my paper; Chapter 1 documents the US loss in manufacturing in general and describes the history, organization, and decline of the US garment industry in particular; Chapter 2 contains the history, organization, and decline of the garment industry in Boston and its impact on Cantonese women; Chapter 3 recounts opinions and related theories about the impact of the job change for the Cantonese women, my questions about the job change, and my methodology; Chapter 4 holds my findings; and Chapter 5 contains my conclusions.

## 1. LOSS OF MANUFACTURING AND DECLINE OF GARMENT INDUSTRY IN US

### Post-War Increase in Global Market Competition

Since WWII there has been an increase in the competition of manufactured goods in the world market. Previously, the US had dominated. But with the reconstruction of Europe and Japan after the war, the US lost its share of the world market while Japan, especially, increased its share of the world market by the 1970s.

The proportion of other countries' share of the world market also began to increase. These countries include Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong, now called the "newly industrializing countries" or NICs. Still others which had already been industrializing, namely Brazil, Mexico, and Spain continued to produce their share.

### Strategies of US Firms

Consequently, US firms began to be out-competed. US firms had been using the simple system of "mark-up pricing" up to that time to maintain or increase their profits. They could no longer do so with the increased

availability and quality of competitive goods (from the aforementioned countries) for US consumption. Yet US firms were not innovative with the technology or quality of their products. Instead, US firms tried to cut their costs of production.

There were various ways to do so. They could "zap labor," bid to the government to reduce their taxes or to reduce the cost of meeting regulations. They did all three.

There were basically four ways to "zap labor" within the US borders. They could cut labor costs through concessions; through a two-tiered wage system (with new employees paid less for a longer time than the few stable at the core with seniority); through the use of contingent work such as part-time workers, workers under subcontractors, leased and temporary workers, and home-workers; and through union avoidance. (Bluestone & Harrison, 1988; Standing, 1989; Christopherson, 1988)

In addition, they could "zap labor" domestically by moving plants and facilities to substantially cheaper and non-unionized labor across seas or by simply importing completely foreign made products, slapping a US label on it, and selling it. (Finally, there are even completely foreign plants here in the US that the US retailer can buy from and sell to US consumers.)

The attractions to set up operations or assembly abroad, in addition to keeping labor costs down, were to access foreign markets or to take advantage of special tax incentives offered by foreign governments. (Although, sometimes, US firms were required to employ local labor or "contribute" in some way to the local economy for setting up facilities there under "local content" law.)

### Loss of US Manufacturing

Consequently, there were losses of manufacturing firms and jobs in the US through complete shutdowns, physical cut-backs, and "runaway shops" to overseas or to other areas of the US with lower wages, lower unionization, and a better "business climate" provided by local government.

The manufacturing industries most affected by the increased international competition for product markets are in the labor-intensive industries of textiles, garments, and electronic assembly (Knox & Agnew, 19XX; Bluestone & Harrison, 1982); in other words, the greatest losses in US industry occurred in

"industries where profits are difficult to maintain through increases in technological inputs but relatively easy to increase by substituting low-wage for high-wage labor." (Knox & Agnew, 19XX:34)



These are the industries of US reinvestment abroad. (Although automobile and other durable goods industries were also greatly affected as well.)

### NIDL and Global Effects

Thus, there was a "hollowing"<sup>2</sup> of America; the US was deindustrializing - it was no longer maintaining its basic manufacturing industries and began to perform more of the financial and communications functions instead. The US and other advanced industrialized countries' (AICs) cities which perform these functions which are increasingly needed by the new capitalist system have been labeled "global cities" (Sassen-Koob, 1988). Meanwhile, some developing countries were no longer simply exporters of raw materials (as in the earlier international division of labor (ILD)) but the loci of manufacturing or assembly. With the products produced in the developing countries not only for their markets but also reimported to the AICs along with the flooding of the global market by other AIC and NIC goods, the new international division of labor (NIDL) was born.

Knox and Agnew argue that this new global trade has not improved the status of developing countries at the "periphery" but has, in fact, actually

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<sup>2</sup>Bluestone & Harrison, 1988, quoting Akio Morita, chair & co-founder of Sony Corporation.

reinforced

"the long-standing domination of intra-core and inter-core trade at the expenses of core-periphery trade." (Knox & Agnew, 19XX:35)

and that trade between the core and its ex-colonies has made

"the smaller, peripheral partners in these trading relationships...highly dependent on levels of demand and the overall economic climate in the core economies." (Knox & Agnew, 19XX:37)

### Causes and Scale of US Garment Industry Decline

According to the Report on Immigration, the high labor intensity of the garment industry coupled with the minimum wage standards in the US places US firms at a disadvantage in global garment market competition. Although the wages of the garment industry are relatively low compared to other manufacturing in the US, wages in Korea are only 13% and in Hong Kong are 16% of that of the US. Space is vastly cheaper abroad as well. In addition, since consumer tastes have been shifting towards more casual and unstructured clothing which requires less skill, foreign manufacturers and small domestic shops have a competitive edge over the larger, more capitalized US firms. (Dept. of Labor, 1989)

Thus, even though the US is the fastest growing consumer of garments worldwide, between 1980 and 1986, the trade balance for this industry plunged from -\$4.7 billion to -\$17.6 billion. (Dept. of Labor, 1989:111) Just from 1974 to 1985, US imports of garments more than doubled, reaching

48% of the US garment market while the US exported very little of its garments. (EDIC report, 1982) In more concrete terms, in 1967, one out of every 25 garments sold in the US was imported; by 1980, one out of every four garments sold in the US was imported. (EDIC report, 1982) Consequently, the US garment industry has lost 200,000 jobs or 10% of its jobs from 1969 to 1979. (MIT Commission, 1988)

In 1988, there were 15,000 garment firms operating 21,000 plants. These firms tend to be small, the majority (70%) of them employing fewer than 50 people. (MIT Commission, 1988)

#### Organization of the US Garment Industry & Change Under Restructuring

For most of its history, the garment industry has had a linear, top-down production arrangement. Usually within a spatially-bound area, four components of the sub-contracting hierarchy (from top to bottom) exist: (1) the retailer, (2) the manufacturer or "jobber," (3) the contractor, and, finally, (4) the production worker. Almost always the contemporary production worker at the bottom of the hierarchy of control is an immigrant or ethnic woman worker. Much of the garment industry has been unionized, but the degree of unionization varies according to the segment of the industry, from city to city, and from region to region.

The industry today is segmented along product, quality, price, skill, and ethnic divisions. The most prominent division is between menswear and womenswear. This is mainly caused by the stability of menswear and the blue jeans segments since their styles don't change very quickly. In fact, these segments of the industry are generally larger, more standardized (yet have specialized machinery), more capitalized, and more unionized than the womenswear segment.

Womenswear, on the other hand, is a very competitive sector. Seasonal and fashion changes occur several times a year. Thus, production of individual items is limited and reorders are usually done by firms in the "spot market" rather than by the original manufacturer.

Piore points out that it has been the standardizable segments of the garment industry, such as the menswear and blue jeans segments, which had already left city centers in search of rural, unskilled women, that have experienced the most intense foreign competition. The remaining segments such as the womenswear segment of the industry in cities like New York City have often been maintained with only a change in the ethnic immigrant ownership and workforce along immigration patterns, most recently of Asian and Latin origin. (Piore, 1986:30)

## History Of Garment Industry & Immigration

Because of the labor-intensity of the garment industry, the wage component of the industry has always been an important cost for the employer. Thus, from its beginning the industry has employed "marginal" workers, mainly immigrant groups, at lower wages. Early in its history (by 1900), the garment industry was differentiated by function, ethnic group, and gender. As European immigration slowed in the 1930s, other groups of ethnic women took over the production, namely Puerto Rican and black women. The most recent groups to succeed them have been Chinese, Korean, Dominican, and Mexican immigrant women.

The bottom, low-price sector of the garment industry is easily accessible to immigrant entrepreneurs because of the low capital costs requirements of this sector. However, this sector of the industry is also highly competitive and risky. Therefore, it must rely on a high degree of labor flexibility such as achieved through the use of female immigrant labor under a management style Waldinger (1985:343) calls "authority through consent." This means that employers obtain consent of workers for less-than-agreeable work arrangements with a paternalism that blurs "the line between economic and social ties." (Dept. of Labor, 1989:111) For example,

"on the job they [small shop employers] may train and encourage workers more than their counterparts in larger operations; they may also allow mothers of small children to bring them to work, or to work out of their homes. Elsewhere they may intervene on behalf of workers with legal or housing problems. If minimum wage, overtime and/or other labor standards are violated, the immigrant worker has a certain incentive to keep quiet about them. She, too, gains flexibility from this arrangement (Pessar, 1987)." (Dept. of Labor, 1989:111; my emphasis)

Nonetheless, "despite U.S. [garment] manufacturers' efforts to lower production costs, their long-term prospects appear bleak." (Dept. of Labor, 1989:111)

### Historical US Labor Market Segmentation

Historically, the general labor market in the US has been segmented along racial, ethnic, and gender lines. The primary labor market is comprised by mostly white men and has advantages that the secondary labor market doesn't have, namely job security, higher wages and better benefits, and opportunities for upward mobility through internal labor markets. Ethnic minority and women workers are barred from this primary sector through systematic means such as educational opportunities and internal labor markets. (Gordon, Edwards, & Reich, 1982; Harrison & Sum, 1979)

A combination of these characteristics in workers such as with ethnic working-class women predisposes them to multiple barriers for the better jobs. (Nakano-Glenn, 1985)

This ethnic and gender division of labor is exactly exemplified with the history of the Chinese in the garment industry. In fact, this history has been surprisingly long.

### History of Chinese Men in US Garment Industry

Many Chinese men first came to the US during the gold rush. At first, they were welcomed in California as providers of what was thought of as "women's work" in the predominantly male society on the west coast in the 1860s. By the late 1860s, many of the Chinese men were working in garment industry shops. The industry became one of the most significant employer of these men, second only to the cigar industry. The number of Chinese men in the garment industry became sizable enough for them to form their own guilds based on the type of garment they produced since they were excluded from the general unions because of the growing anti-Chinese sentiment on the west coast after the gold rush. (Wong, 1983)

Although the new technology and equipment used by the development of the garment industry in the east coast soon out-competed the earlier industry on the west coast, the absolute number of Chinese in garment shops in San Francisco remained stable until the beginning of this century. In fact, around

the turn of the century, the Chinese-men owned and operated garment shops were incorporated into the subcontracting system already described. That is, the small shops in the San Francisco Chinatown became the contractors for the manufacturers downtown. (Wong, 1983)

### Past & Present Chinese Women in US Garment Industry

It is important to note that for most of the period between 1860 to 1920, the ratio of Chinese men to women in the US ranged from 13 to 20 males to one female. (Nakano-Glenn, 1985:92) By 1930, the ratio improved only slightly: six Chinese males to one Chinese female. The male/female ratio remained skewed because of immigration laws prohibiting the flow of Chinese into the US until after the 1950s. However, even only after WWI, there were more Chinese women working in the garment shops than men in San Francisco Chinatown. Yet, the Chinese guilds excluded this growing garment workforce (of Chinese women) from joining their organizations. (Wong, 1983)

Wong (while citing Lyman, 1974 and Chinn, 1971) argues that the incorporation of the Chinese shops into the subcontracting system, the take-over of garment production by Chinese women, and the fact that these women weren't allowed to join the guilds caused, in part, the decline of the guilds.



In place of the Chinese guilds, a "Unionist Guild" was formed in San Francisco. It managed to win some benefits for the Chinese women.

Although by 1932 in San Francisco, the garment industry had grown to be a principal industry in Chinatown with about 30 shops incorporated into the subcontracting system, the shops were not unionized until the late 1930s and then with only a limited number of successes to show for it.

For the Chinese working-class women, the garment work arrangement has been less-than-agreeable with low wages, no medical benefits, no vacations, no overtime or sick pay, long work hours, and no union representation. Despite these factors, it has represented and still represents a significant portion of the employment of Chinese women workers in the US.

"In 1969, about 75% of employed women residents in New York Chinatown reported that they worked as seamstresses in the more than 230 garment factories scattered around the fringes of that district (Sung, 1975:252; Chinatown Study Group, 1969:51)." (Wong, 1983:364) and

"In 1970, 43.7% of all employed Chinese females in New York City were operatives. In Boston, the percentage was 39.6%; in Chicago, 23.4%; in San Francisco-Oakland, 26.3%; in Seattle, 29.6%; and in Los Angeles, 25.6% (U.S. Census, 1973). The percentages are probably higher in 1981 due to the continued influx of large numbers of Chinese immigrants."<sup>3</sup> (Wong, 1983:364; my emphasis)

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<sup>3</sup>These percentages include non-working-class Chinese women as well, perhaps Chinese women workers of successive generations or of middle- or upper-class immigrants.

The predominance of Chinese women working in the garment industry is echoed by Nakano-Glenn in her description of the contemporary scenario of a typical Chinese working-class family. After WWII, economic conditions undermined the viability of Chinese family enterprises such as laundries and small enterprises in which the women had carried out a substantial part of the work but were not paid by wage. This development forced more of the Chinese working-class family into "dual wage earning":

"Handicapped by language, by family responsibilities and gender and race discrimination in the skilled trades, both husbands and wives are employed in the secondary labor market - in low wage service and competitive manufacturing sectors. The most typical constellation among immigrant families is a husband employed as a restaurant worker, store helper or janitor and a wife employed as an operative in a small garment shop. The shops are located in, or close to, Chinatowns and are typically subcontracting firms run by Chinese. They often evade minimum wage laws by using an unofficial piece rate system (Nee and Nee, 1972)." (Nakano-Glenn, 1985:97; my emphasis)

Nakano-Glenn is specifically interested in the women within these Chinese working-class families in the US:

"Working mothers are responsible for not only the lion's share of domestic chores, but often raise their children almost single-handedly. Husbands are frequently employed in the restaurant trade, which requires them to be at work from 11 in the morning until 10 in the evening or even midnight. Thus, they are rarely around while their children are awake. The women's own work hours are often prolonged because they leave work during the day to cook meals or pick up children. They make up the time by returning to the shop for evening work or by taking materials home to sew at night (Ikels and Shang, 1979). Their energy is entirely absorbed by paid employment and domestic responsibilities." (Nakano-Glenn, 1985:99; my emphasis)

### Summary of Literature

As described earlier the literature on the links between job, household, and community for ethnic working-class suggests that there are close connections between job and household work for these women because of their high economic responsibility to their household because it is low-income. These women must perform multiple tasks of wage-earning and performing domestic functions since, for instance, childcare is too expensive for them. Thus, their public and private spheres are meshed. The literature also suggests that they have close links to their community because of they share with other women a dependence on public resources and the male wage-earner in the household.

This shared experience provides a commonality in the workplace and the community based on gender, ethnicity, and class which may then provide a basis for potential political organizing and activism. The question then becomes will changes under restructuring alter this potential for political organizing and activism.

Thus, in addition to the concerns about the effects of the economic and industrial restructuring for those especially vulnerable in the labor market, namely ethnic "minorities," recent immigrants, and women, we need to look at the effects of this transformation of the economy and hence labor market on groups with a combination of these characteristics (such as ethnic working-

class women) that make them especially vulnerable to the changes that we are undergoing.

There are concerns about the job-effects with the increase use of flexibility, contingent work, and women under the current restructuring and its implication for wages and benefits as these correspond to the socio-economic status of women. There are also concerns about the intensified time-use for women versus men and other such inequities under the current restructuring.

We will keep these concerns for ethnic working-class women in mind as we look at the particulars of the Chinese immigrant women in Boston undergoing job change following the pattern of current economic development in the US and as it is manifested locally in the period from approximately 1970 until now.

## 2. LOSS OF GARMENT JOBS FOR CANTONESE WOMEN IN BOSTON

### Scale of Garment Job Loss in Massachusetts & Boston

"Massachusetts' manufacturing industries were heavily skewed toward textiles, shoes, and apparel - mature labor-intensive industries with little innovation and great competition from other areas." (Markusen & Carlson, 1989; my emphasis)

In addition to the particular historically-based industry mix of a region, we must take into account other unique features of localities such as its immigration pattern and labor supply, its physical layout, and its local politics in order to understand the resultant effects of economic and industrial restructuring on a particular area. For instance, the garment industry in New York City and Los Angeles are different from each other but both are maintaining some market share whereas Boston, Massachusetts doesn't appear to be doing as well in the garment industry. Since the effects of restructuring vary from region to region, we should be careful not to generalize about the effects of restructuring.

For Massachusetts, 25,600 (53%) of its garment jobs were lost from 1970 to 1989. (Boston Herald, 1990) Since other data available shows that from 1970 to 1980, Massachusetts lost 8,500 garment jobs (EDIC report, 1982), we can determine that more jobs were lost between 1980 and 1989 than in the decade before.

For a similar period (1969 to 1979), the city of Boston lost 4,684 or 37% of its garment jobs (EDIC report, 1982) out of about 8,500 garment jobs lost in the state during that time. Boston's large share of Massachusetts' loss of garment industry employment indicates the concentration of garment industry employment in Boston and furthermore, in Chinatown: in 1979, the Boston SMSA had 13,100 garment jobs, Boston as a city had 7,932 garment jobs, and Chinatown, in turn, had 60% of Boston's garment employment. (EDIC report, 1982)

Referring specifically to womenswear<sup>4</sup> firms which are the majority of the firms located in Boston Chinatown and which employed primarily Cantonese women: in 1970, the womenswear segment of the garment industry equalled 1.45% of the city's total employment. In 1980, the womenswear segment had decreased to 1.25% of the city's employment; in this year, Boston had 117 shops with 5,206 workers, while Chinatown had approximately 67<sup>5</sup> garment shops with 2,770 workers. By 1988, the womenswear segment had decreased drastically to only .30% of the city's total employment. The latest data - third quarter of 1989 - shows a slight increase of the womenswear segment of

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<sup>4</sup>I have defined the "womenswear segment" of the garment industry to include only the "Womens & Misses Outerwear" and "Womens & Misses Undergarments" categories of the Standard Industrial Code (SIC) 23 for "Apparel & Other Textile Products."

<sup>5</sup>An estimate by an ILGWU official for the early 1980s; he added 12 manufacturers to about 45 contractors, resulting in the 67 shops.

the garment industry employment to .31%. (my calculation from DET data)

### History of Workforce of Garment Industry in Boston

Boston had a labor market that drew the garment industry here as early as 1910. It first it employed Jewish and Italian men, then Jewish and Italian women, and finally, Cantonese women. In Boston, from the 1970s onwards, the contractors employed 80% Chinese, 15% Hispanic, and 5% Italian and other as stitchers. The stitchers are all women, the cutters and pressers are all men, thereby displaying the ethnic and gender division of work within the contemporary garment shop.

For reasons already explained, reference to the "garment industry" in Boston actually implies the womenswear segment of the garment industry rather other segments, the difference (already cited) being that the womenswear sector with frequent seasonal and fashion changes requires small, flexible shops which managed to stay in city centers whereas more "capitalized" factories (producing menswear and blue jeans, for instance) have moved out. It is in these small, flexible shops producing womenswear that most of the Cantonese women have been working.

Since most of the remaining garment jobs are located in Boston and in

Chinatown in particular, and most (80%) of those employed by the shops are Cantonese women, the impact of job loss on them has been great.

### Organization of Garment Industry in Boston

Also as described earlier the garment industry has the following components in its subcontracting system of production: the retailer, the manufacturers or jobbers, the contractors, and the production worker. However, it is important to understand the kinds of work done within each unit - that is, we need to understand the organization of production - in order to understand their relations and the consequent changes that have occurred locally in Boston.

The local manufacturers had in-house designers, cutters, and sample stitchers. They were also the suppliers of materials. In Boston, examples of manufacturers are College Town, Lesley Fay, and Liz Claiborne. Jobbers had only designers who then contracted out; they did not have any cutters, stitchers, or pressers. Contractors, in which all the Cantonese women worked, had no cutters but only stitchers and pressers.

20 to 25 years ago (before 1965/1970), the organization of the production in the garment industry in Boston was the following: a retailer such as Filenes would contract a manufacturer (such as College Town, Summit, or Becken



Ridge) who would then order from a contractor - a large number of which were in Chinatown who would then hire mainly Cantonese immigrant women.

### Change in Organization of Garment Production Under Restructuring in Boston

Although the competition of imports hit the US especially hard in the 1980s and Boston in 1984/1985, the beginning of the change in the garment industry started 20 to 25 years ago or beginning around 1965/1970. Garment manufacturers in Boston began to be wiped out in three ways. First, retailers such as Filenes and Jordans decided to bypass the manufacturers with overseas contracting to save on labor costs. All the retailers (such as Filenes and Jordans) then wanted only the jobbers (with designers) and the contractors (with the production), thereby eliminating the manufacturers (such as College Town, Lesley Fay, and Liz Claiborne) and put their own labels on the clothing instead of a manufacturer's label.

Second, in addition to this by-passing of manufacturers by retailers, other manufacturers such as College Town, Century, and Swabby which were family businesses were bought up and eventually shut down by large corporations such as InterCo and Gulf & Western in the early 1980s.

Finally, these previous two factors of by-passing and buy-outs in the collapse of the garment industry were supplemented by the fact that the children of the aging owners of the contracting shops did not want to take over the business.

Because the manufacturers were eliminated from the garment production process and the remaining contractors did not have any established connections with the firms of Filenes or Jordans, the contractors could not get work after the elimination of the manufacturers. Thus, when College Town, a manufacturer, went out of business in 1985, P&L Sportswear, a contractor, also went out of business, laying off 350-400 workers, most of whom were Cantonese women. Following P&L, Century, another manufacturer, also went out of business.

Some manufacturers have become jobbers even though the jobber's position was also weakened by imports, multinational buy-outs, and age. Thus, they also weakened the contractors.

By 1981/1982, there were approximately 12 manufacturers and 40 to 45 contractors in the Chinatown area. Currently, there are three union manufacturers in the area and a small number of non-union manufacturers.

In contrast to garment industry in other cities, there are two major distinctions with the garment industry in Boston: none of the shops in Boston were/are owned and managed by Cantonese even though the contractor shops employ mostly Cantonese women; and most of the shops were unionized (at least until recently, although there are more non-unionized shops now than before, according to the ILGWU official).

### Activism of Cantonese Women To Get Government Employment Services

In 1985, when one particular contractor, P&L, closed shop, approximately 350-400 workers were laid off. This was the largest lay-off of a garment shop to have occurred in the Boston area. Approximately 300 of those laid-off were Cantonese immigrant women. Some of these Cantonese women had heard (perhaps through their children) of another plant shutdown in the area in which the laid-off workers received a training and job placement program from the government. A few of them approached the Chinatown community organization trusted for protecting the rights of the Chinese community, the Chinese Progressive Association (CPA), for help in getting a program or simply jobs. The "other factory" that they heard about was a meat-packing company in the Boston area (Colonial Meatpacking) which had a predominantly white male workforce which had received the state employment training services.

Thus, the CPA along with a few of the women began to protest to the state for not getting their fair share of government services. They eventually began picketing and demonstrating in front of the state house as well as through the streets of Chinatown and downtown. This kind of display of protest was in itself novel for the laid-off women themselves as well as for the community. In fact, many of the women were very hesitant to join the demonstration because of their culture and experience in society (namely, oppression) which greatly inhibited their being out-spoken or demonstrative in many ways.

Nonetheless, enough of them manage to overcome these barriers, even against their husbands who strongly discouraged them from these activities, to get an Employment Training (ET) program from the state after several months. In 1986, almost a year after the shop closing of P&L, approximately 300 women began to attend classes for ESL, vocational training, and interviewing techniques and to get job placement help. This was, in many ways, a great victory for the community and especially for these women within the politics of Boston and in society in general with regard to the ethnic and gender constraints in place against them.

After this ET program, Bunker Hill Workers Assistance Center (WAC), was

set up for them, a limited number of subsequently displaced garment workers also received services there.

### Job Placement Procedure & Resultant Placements in ET program

The job placement worked in the following way: the "job developer" at the time basically surveyed the labor market in Boston at the time, decided what were the most available and appropriate jobs for her clients, proceeded to contact these places, and placed the women in the jobs.

The job developer believed that the jobs that were available at the time which were most appropriate for these women were in food services, hotel services, clerical positions, and other light manufacturing such as pharmaceutical. Daycare and plant-care were also vocational training options made available to the women. The job developer was decisive in this process of job placement because she was the one who decided first what were available and appropriate jobs for the women, thereby prescreening the jobs the women may have gotten.

In any case, the job developer reported that out of the 130-150 Cantonese women the Center placed, approximately 75-100 of them went into the food service, about 20 people in clerical, a few went into daycare, a few in

assembly, and the rest retired or found other garment jobs. She believes that many of the laid-off Cantonese women garment workers who have not gone through the ET program found jobs in the hotels as house-keepers or food service workers through friends (other Cantonese women) already employed there.

The job developer explains that the reason that so many of them were placed in food service jobs was because many of the women wanted food service jobs, so that three classes totaling more than 70 people were trained in food service provision. The ET program was connected to Boston University and placement in their dining halls food service work was easy enough. Work in a dining hall requires more English than in the food preparation jobs at "Mariott-inflight" (packaging food for airplane meals) which accommodated many of the women who did not receive training.

The job developer believes that the availability of food service jobs stems from the growth in the industry since the 1970s and 1980s. One particular catering service, Creative Gourmet in Allston, which has hired quite a few Cantonese women opened in the 1980s.

#### Sectoral Shifts in Boston & Job Opportunities

I have calculated data (from DET) for sectors of the economy that the Cantonese women have left and entered in order to get an outline of the rise and decline of these sectors in the Boston economy (upon which we can make extrapolations for Chinatown):

As cited earlier for the womenswear segment<sup>6</sup> of the garment industry in Boston, in which most of the Cantonese women were employed: in 1970, the womenswear segment equalled 1.45% of the city's total employment; in 1980, the womenswear segment had decreased to 1.25% of the city's employment; by 1988, the womenswear segment had decreased drastically to only .30% of the city's total employment; and the latest data - third quarter of 1989 - shows a slight increase of the womenswear segment employment to .31%. From 1970 to 1989, then, there has been a total decrease of -1.14% of employment in the womenswear segment of the garment industry as a share of total employment in Boston.

In 1970, "Eating and Drinking Places"<sup>7</sup> equalled 4.49% of the city's employment; in 1980, the "Eating and Drinking Places" had increased to 5.08% of the city's employment; by 1988, "Eating and Drinking Places" had

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<sup>6</sup>Please refer to footnote 4.

<sup>7</sup>Dining hall, cafeteria, and catering food service are included under "Eating and Drinking Places" SIC 58 which is not broken down any further in the DET data for Boston.

increased to 5.43% of the city's employment; and by the third quarter of 1989, there had been a significant increase in the "Eating and Drinking Places" employment to 5.77%. Thus, from 1970 to 1989, there has been a total increase of +1.28% in "Eating and Drinking Places" employment as a share of the city's total employment.

In 1970, "Hotels and Motels"<sup>8</sup> equalled 1.32% of the city's employment; by 1980, "Hotels and Motels" actually decreased to 1.26% of the city's employment; but by 1988, "Hotels and Motels" had risen to 2.18% of the city's employment; and, finally, in the third quarter of 1989, there has been another significant increase in the "Hotels and Motels" employment to 2.4% of the city's total employment. From 1970 to 1989, then, there has also been a total increase of +1.08% in the employment by "Hotels and Motels" as a share of total employment in Boston.

Thus, we can see that employment in the womenswear segment of the garment industry has declined drastically since 1970, especially since 1980, while employment in the "Eating and Drinking Places" and "Hotels and Motels" industries has risen just as drastically. It can safely be assumed that in addition to the intervention of the job developer in placing many of the

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<sup>8</sup>"Hotels and Motels," the category I believe most of the Cantonese women have gone into within the SIC 70, is not the only category under SIC 70.



women the center served into food service jobs, part of the reason that so many of the Chinese women displaced from the garment industry went into food service and hotel jobs was because of the decline of the former industry and the rise of the latter. That is, the demand of the labor market accompanying the current economic development is determining the job placement for those who are leaving the defunct manufacturing industries. This event supports the general observation that the primary characteristic of "restructuring" is the decline of the manufacturing industry and the growth of the service sector.

However, the role of the job developer in this and other employment training services should not be under-emphasized because the job developer has a critical part to play in the job placement of clients. The job developer screens the jobs for the clients and decides on their behalf what are appropriate kinds of jobs for them.

However, we must keep in mind that "'training' should be put in its proper context - a minor component of any strategy to improve women's economic and labor market status." (Standing, 1989:1094)

### 3. OPINIONS AROUND IMPACT OF JOB CHANGE ON CANTONESE WOMEN WORKERS IN BOSTON & RELEVANT LITERATURE

#### Opinions on the Job Change of Cantonese Women Workers

The different people (i.e. community activist, ET funder, union official, job developer) involved in some way with these Cantonese women in their job change have different opinions regarding the consequences for the women from this change. Along the lines of my argument, I have asked questions that place them in one camp of "in favor of new jobs" or the other of "in favor of old jobs."

#### "In Favor of New Jobs" Opinion

The community activist interviewed on these events believes that the job change for Cantonese women recently is good for the community. That is, she believes that whereas "before" women in the community had only the one option of garment work, there are now different jobs that they can go into. Therefore, "it is good to have diversity," especially so that Cantonese women workers as a group are not "sitting ducks" as they have proven to be with the mass lay-offs in the garment industry. There is no such thing as a long-term industry, she points out.

Yet, she admits that these new jobs they are entering are "still very low level and dead-end." Furthermore, she notes that these new jobs are "scattered" and that the women may find it "difficult to function and feel support." Thus, she thinks that although the change to a more diverse set of jobs open to Cantonese immigrant women is positive as a whole, the process of change is "difficult for the initial people - the pioneers."

On the point about diversity of jobs being a positive development for the Cantonese women workers as a group so that they are no longer "sitting ducks" vulnerable to one industry, a well-respected academician and community member agrees.

Surprisingly, this acceptance of current developments from community members is similar to the response given by a researcher at the Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA), the city redevelopment agency. This researcher believes that the garment industry was very exploitative of the Chinese women and other workers and that since these jobs are now gone, the solution is to focus on training the Chinese workforce. That is, his suggestion for community development is through the supply-side prescription of human-capital building. In fact, the BRA's work is to support the "growth industries" namely the service sector and we can assume that what

some of those in the BRA agree to is an increase in "training" for ethnic communities to fill the service jobs which have been the low-level ones they have gotten to date!

An administrator of the state funding agency for the ET program has some criticisms about the push of CPA for "community organizing" and the lack of attention paid to the individual needs and goals of the women who entered the ET programs. Consequently, some of the women who were older received training that they didn't use and others received training that they couldn't use because they didn't have access to job postings nor to the jobs themselves. Such was the case with daycare training and the subsequent lack of placement in these jobs. Since this person is on the funding end of the ET program process, she feels that there has been an unnecessary waste of money in such cases, as well as a failure instead of an "empowering" of these women.

She does feel, however, that ESL classes (or learning English) and having jobs that bring them outside their community such as through the public transit<sup>9</sup>, is good for these women. She thinks that it will provide them with more skills for dealing with the larger society and thereby "empower" them. This

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<sup>9</sup>An assumption that these women were not spatially mobile or that they were confined to their community (perhaps Chinatown) that I also made.

is a benefit from the current job changes for these women.

### "In Favor of Old Jobs" Opinion

The ILGWU official believes that the massive shift of Cantonese women from the garment industry may have been prevented. There were jobs open in garment shops while these women were attending the ET program. He believes that the state provided the program to the women because of political reasons at the time: the visibility of the community activism led by the CPA, the desire of the state employment agency (DET) administration to look good, as well as the agency's mandate to look good because the governor, Dukakis, was campaigning for the presidency.

Although this union official concedes that those laid off by P&L were not highly-skilled because it was a highly automated, mass production shop and therefor could not be reabsorbed quickly or completely by the garment industry, the 80 highly-skilled workers laid off by Beverly Rose could have been reabsorbed in the garment industry. But, because of the "political climate" at that time, Beverly Rose workers also got job training. Jobbers needed contractors and contractors needed stitchers - but these needs remained unfulfilled. Another 80 laid off by Andy's also could have also been reabsorbed by the garment industry but the state encouraged the people to

leave the garment industry for its own "image protection."

Consequently, it was difficult to get workers because of the bad image created, in part, by the state and the media of the garment industry.

Now contractors may be non-union, employing retirees, people who want cash, and those who are willing to perform homework.

The union official believes that the Cantonese women enjoyed working at the garment shops because 80% of the workers are Cantonese and they feel comfortable working in an environment that supports their own culture and food. He believes that they also like the work because it is piecework which means that it offers flexibility (given that seasonal work and that if one doesn't work-one doesn't get paid is acceptable to them). Finally, he believes that the Cantonese women like the work also because the shops are in or close to Chinatown where they need to buy food or meet others; the other sites for garment shops - Allston-Brighton, Cambridge, and South Boston - have been close enough to Chinatown to be successful in drawing the Cantonese workforce.

The union official thinks that the new jobs of those laid off from the garment industry include hospitals, hotels, some light manufacturing, and

banking jobs.

The job developer at the Bunker Hill WAC, believes that the wages in the food service jobs are steadier than the wages these women were getting in the garment jobs although the work in food service is seasonal and may have lay-offs in the summer. Another community activist also cites that the hotel jobs that many of the dislocated garment workers have entered are seasonal.

However, she thinks that the garment industry jobs were ideal for mothers because of the self-pace of the work and the flexibility of the work time, enabled by piecework so that they could bring children to and from school, cook meals, and in the case of emergencies - didn't have to go in to work. They were in a sense "in charge" and "self-employed." The advantages of the industry jobs are evidenced by the fact that there were some Cantonese women who grew up here as teenagers (& therefor have English skills) who chose to stay in the industry because of its flexibility.

She placed most of the Center's clients except for those over 60 years of age in jobs "in which not-speaking English is ok." However, "lots" of them tried to go back into the garment industry after being placed in other kinds of jobs. Many of them felt insecure in clerical jobs in which the boss is a white male. She estimates that of those placed, as many as half of them,

most of those older, went back to garment jobs.

### Literature Which Supports "In Favor Old Jobs" Opinion

With regard to ethnic women in the workplace, development of "class consciousness," and potential for political activism, Bookman, Berger, and Ackelsberg argue that ethnicity, class, and gender commonality are positive for political organizing and activism both in the workplace and in the community. (In this context, then, the Cantonese women workers would not only have better support network but also an increased potential for political organizing and activism in their garment jobs because these components were certainly there. However, in their new jobs, they are dispersed in different work sites and furthermore, they now have increased limitations on their opportunities for meeting outside the workplace because of their different work schedules. In fact, most of the Cantonese women interviewed felt tension with their non-Chinese co-workers which is hardly conducive to support, camaraderie, development of "class consciousness," or potential political organizing and activism.)

The increased use of women in contingent work, as described by Standing and Christopherson, would also tend to discredit the advantages of the new jobs over the old ones, thereby supporting the old jobs by default.



### Summary of Opinions & Literature Thus Far

Thus, I have interviewed people involved with the Cantonese women workers in their job change who have opinions that I have categorized as "in favor of new jobs." The other opinion that the informants hold which may be generally described as "in favor of old jobs." I have also emphasized throughout this paper from the relevant literature other authors and researchers' observations, assertions, and ideas which support my own argument which may be placed in the "in favor of old jobs" camp.

From the "in favor of new jobs" camp the opinions cited thought that the new jobs are good for the women as a group and as individuals. In their opinion, the new jobs are good for the women as a group because they will now have diversified jobs that will prevent them from being "sitting ducks" when an industry declines as the garment industry experience has been for them. Others believe that the new jobs are good for the women as individuals because by having to be in the "outside world" now, these women must learn how to get around the city beyond their community, be with other kinds of people, and both of these require them to learn more English. All this then will serve to "empower" these women and enable them to be more in charge in the larger society.

From the "in favor of old jobs" camp the opinion is that the old jobs or the garment jobs are good for the larger picture and for the women as individuals. The first believe that the decline of the garment industry was not inevitable or that the garment jobs were better for these women as individuals. Some believe that some of the displacement of these women and their consequent transfer to other kinds of jobs was unnecessary and avoidable; that the decline of the garment industry could have been buffered under different local political circumstances. The old jobs also nurtured their common culture because the majority of Cantonese women in the shops as well as because the shops were located in or near Chinatown. Others believe that the garment jobs offered a flexibility that is unsurpassed for women (essentially because of their domestic tasks) and that the nature of the garment work actually gave the women a sense of being "in-charge" or being "self-employed."

Observations, assertions, and ideas of researchers in the relevant literature range from the observation that one of the ways to lower labor costs under the economic change is to use contingent work, to the fact that the garment jobs better enable the women to perform their simultaneous tasks as wage-earners, mothers, and wives, to the observation that gender and ethnicity commonality in the workplace offer support, development of class

consciousness, and potential political activism for those groups such as ethnic working-class women who are especially vulnerable to the in the labor market.

### My Point of Entry

My point of entry into this study was that since I am a part of this community and saw first hand the displacement of many of the women from the garment industry, I began to question what the effects of displacement were on them and their families. In forming this question, I began to see that I could not look at their jobs in a vacuum but rather their jobs were closely tied to their tasks in the household as a wife, mother, and sometimes daughter (as I had always witnessed growing up in the community). I also understood that the garment jobs were not just jobs for these women but social places where they met their peers. Finally, my point of entry was also a concern for the well-being of these women.

However, this well-being needs to be decomposed into components (if possible) in order to understand the effects of a job change of the kind we are seeing on the lives of these women.

In doing this task perhaps it is important to keep in mind bits and pieces from the literature on ethnic working-class women as well as the opinions and

various motives of the people involved in the job change process of the Cantonese women i.e. community activist, union official, ET funder, and job developer when we are trying to define the "objective" well-being for these women.

Obviously, the women themselves can do this best. I would argue this irrespective of "exploitation" and other such concepts imposed on them about their work and lives particularly with regard to the garment jobs. However, we need to understand this from their perspective: the opportunities they see are open to them, their choices (if any), etc. The danger in doing this is that we focus only on them when we must also look at the structure around them - the whys and hows of segmented work in society and at home, who benefits, who loses, and how this might be changed. However, I would argue that change should not occur at the expense of these women's well-being and choice individually here and now.

I am suggesting that the long-run approach of respectful and understanding support for these women on their behalf instead of the short-run approach that may see "diversification" or "empowerment" as helpful. I believe that the latter concept as used by those involved with the job change process of these women may actually be harmful to these women as individuals.

Thus, drawing from informants opinions on the effect of the job change on the Cantonese women, the relevant literature, and my own experience in the community, I have come up with the following aspects of the womens' lives that need to be understood in order to answer the question of what effects the job change has had on their lives and whether this has been a "positive" or "negative" change.

### My Model of Women's Well-being

First regarding the job change itself: what has changed? kind of work, wages, benefits, time of work, relations with other people at the workplace, and control issues. Next, with regard to how the change in job might affect their household work: the distribution of work and money in the household and possible changes. With regard to their social network or friends - how have opportunities both to make friends and to gather with them changed with the job change? Finally, a model of the women's well-being must take into account the political issues raised by the "sitting duck" and the empowerment opinion held in favor of the new jobs.

It is my basic understanding that there are links between the womens' jobs, their portion of the household work, and their contact with their peers. Thus, if the job changes, it must affect the other spheres in some way,

especially if there hasn't been any changes in the other spheres to accommodate the job change. For instance, if the job change creates a less flexible schedule for the women, how will this affect them in their household work? - will the household sphere also change to accommodate this change or will they simply have even more work to do? For another instance, if the job changes, will they still have the opportunities for contact with their peers that they enjoy and need so much?

With regard to Nakano-Glenn's account of the husbands work hours in the restaurant trade, I would only change the time of the husbands' work hours in the restaurant as they are typically in the Boston area<sup>10</sup> which tend to be in two shifts. The early shift is from 10 AM to 10 PM, and late shift is from 3:30 PM to 2 AM. I agree with her description of the resultant unevenness between mother and father in taking care of the children and other household tasks.

#### My Questions Similar to Distinctions Made Previously in Literature

Some of the distinctions between the women's and men's jobs or "worse" and "better" jobs, respectively, that Bookman surfaces are similar to the

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<sup>10</sup>In the suburbs of Boston, in other towns in Massachusetts, and even cases of commuting from Boston to New Hampshire or Maine and coming home only once a week to their families.

distinctions I wanted to uncover between the old and new jobs of the Cantonese women. She distinguishes between jobs which use more or less machinery - the women used little or no machinery; their work involved, instead, repeated tasks that required "manual dexterity" and "good eyesight;" and they were paid *pieccerate*, whereas the men's jobs required the use of more machinery; and they were paid hourly rates. She distinguishes the extent of discipline and supervision - the women were constantly watched by the time-study man and the foreman whereas the men were left to their own (pace). She distinguishes between the degree of mobility during production hours - men often left their machines to get parts outside their department whereas the women could not because they stood little chance of exceeding the base rate if they left their benches for even a few minutes. Finally, she distinguishes how isolated or interdependent the job is - the women were interdependent and more supervised and therefore less mobile than their male counterparts.

I have attached a copy of my questionnaire in the appendix of this paper.

#### Methodology, Biases, Potential Error

I have contacted my informants through intermediaries because I believe that it was the best way to approach women who may be reluctant to talk to a

stranger inquiring into their lives. More importantly, I believe that it would be more respectful and less threatening to them if someone they knew personally introduced me to them. Thus, I located my informants through various contacts. Most of them I got in touch with through the former job developer at the Bunker Hill WAC who placed them in jobs. Others I got in touch with through the union official and his assistant. And, finally, I also got in touch with women through the community activist at CPA.

I interviewed most of the women in person - at a coffee shop, at an union office, and at the CPA. A few I interviewed over the telephone because they preferred to do so instead of meeting at a later time in person.

Obviously, my sample of 10 informants is not statistically "correct" in that it is not a random sample nor a large enough group of people to be generalizable to a population. However, as I have pointed out the decline of the garment industry and the rise in the food service and hotel service industries locally in Boston under restructuring render it possible that many of the Cantonese women who used to work in the garment industry have gone into the growing service sector.

Lastly, I conducted the interviews in Cantonese and there may be a few inconsistencies between what these women said and my understanding or



between what we understood in Cantonese and the translation into English.

#### 4. FINDINGS AND RELEVANT ARGUMENTS

##### General

I have interviewed a total of 10 Cantonese women who have once worked in the garment industry; nine of them were laid off by the industry and one of them left the industry to take care of her young children. All of them are now working in a different industry: five of them are now working in food preparation jobs at university dining halls, one of them is working in food service in the cafeteria of a private office building (JH), three of them are working in the same food catering-bakery-"food-to-go" shop, and one of them is working in a plastics manufacturing factory. They have worked in garment jobs for a range of three to 34 years; the actual years of garment work were: 3, 3+, 4, 5, 7, 10, 13, 14, 20, and 34 years. Interestingly or perhaps not surprisingly, the two who worked longest in garment work (also the earliest immigrants) understood the most English and were the only two out of the nine laid off to have not participated in the state Employment Training (ET) program; they and the woman with young children found their food service jobs through friends or through the newspaper ads. Conversely, seven out of the 10 interviewed participated in the ET program and found their new jobs through the program. Most of these women are in their 40s, 50s, and 60s now. All their children have grown up, and actually, only some of them had

young kids when they were working in the garment factories - others had grown kids even then. The woman currently with young children is in her 30s.

### Work/Job

From the interviews, we see that job satisfaction is a complicated matter. For example, earnings involve both wage-level and availability of work and required skills may be a challenge or a burden. Social skills, including language and issues of relating to bosses and other workers, are also required in jobs.

### COMPARE PHYSICAL COMFORT OF OLD & NEW JOBS

In terms of the basic "comfort" of the work itself, excluding relationships with other people, the process of the production, and the "rules" or requirements of the workplace, etc., the worst discomfort for the women in the garment work was physical. That is, sitting all day gave them no exercise and caused them back strain; you needed quick hands and good eyesight<sup>11</sup> - if these were faltering, you would have a hard time; if the material, such as wool, was

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<sup>11</sup>The same physical capabilities that Bookman pointed out are necessary for the electronics assembly work done by Portuguese women.

heavy or thick, it was very difficult to sew; and one woman, at least, complained of the allergy she suffered from being in a garment factory - perhaps from the fabric particles in the air or because of the chemicals used in fabric or garment manufacturing. A non-physical aspect of the garment job that was uncomfortable for the women was sewing a difficult or a new style. The latter is an inherent characteristic of the job and industry - although most of the women I interviewed were working in two relatively large factories which were contracted mainly by one company, College Town, which meant that the styles they sewed remained fairly constant and consequently made their jobs easier than they would be otherwise.

Furthermore, if the stitching of the garments, especially samples of the style, were not close to perfect, it had to be taken out and resewn (since the work is piecerate, they wouldn't get paid until the garment was finished without flaws).

On the other hand, one or two women felt that sitting at the garment job was comfortable for them.

In contrast, the worst discomfort in the food service job was not caused by the physical nature of the job, but by the required use of English. English is needed in order to speak to other non-Chinese co-workers and supervisors. One women working in a university dining hall explained that the most

difficult part of her job is reading the daily menu off the bulletin board in order to prepare the food because of her limited ability to read English.

Three women complained that standing all day at their food service jobs was uncomfortable and hurt their feet; one said she only had a half-hour twice a day to eat during which time she was able to sit. One of them felt that the work is heavier now than it was in the garment job.

Someone else felt that the objects she lifts are lighter now in the food service work - the heaviest object that she lifts being a knife. In fact, one adds, men in the catering service workplace will help lift heavy objects for the women. The work now is cleaner, not too demanding, and at the catering establishment, there is food to eat.

Thus, from these responses, the most uncomfortable aspect of the garment job is related to the physical nature of the work - namely, sitting all day and the constant use of hands and eyes, whereas, the most uncomfortable aspect of the food service job is related to a non-physical aspect of the job - namely, the requirement of a knowledge of English. The physical discomforts of the garment job could be countered by youth, endurance, and adaption; whereas, the non-physical discomfort of the lack of English in the food service job can be overcome only by learning English. There is, then, a greater degree of "skill" required for the food service jobs which is not openly acknowledged

and may have proved to be "disempowering" to the women now working in food service jobs who do not have the opportunity to learn English in a classroom because their time is taken up by their job and by their work at home, and because little funding is available for English as a Second Language (ESL) classes.

Already, from this comparison of the basic "comfort" of their old and new tasks at the jobs, we can begin to see that being in a job (the new job) which requires more English because of the presence of non-Chinese supervisors and co-workers and because of the need to travel around the city does not necessarily lead to "empowerment." We need to question whether being "out there" and having difficulty with the language barrier indeed contributes to these women's well-being.

Both the liberal and the left are driven by the idea of assimilation of immigrants, women, and other "peripheral" groups; the liberal so that the group may be incorporated into the mainstream and the left so that the different groups can come together to form a working class consciousness. First, however, we must understand that having different racial/ethnic groups of people working together does not mean that they are in the "mainstream" as there is a segmented labor market, and, second, having different racial/ethnic groups of people even in the same "class" working together does

not guarantee a common class consciousness (in fact, there is tension amongst the groups as we will get to later in the questions to follow).

## COMPARE OLD & NEW WAGES

With regards to wages, the women I spoke to seem to find the wages from both the garment work and the new food service work acceptable. Although, acceptable probably because they had no alternatives for jobs or wages.

There are differences in how they can accept these wages, however. With regards to the garment job wages, they were acceptable only if there was enough work - but there wasn't in this period.<sup>12</sup> One woman believed that the annual wage that could be made in the garment job would be higher than the annual wage in the food service job she has now if there was enough work to do in the garment job. Another woman considers the \$7 to \$8/hour in the garment job good wages. The same woman enjoyed collecting unemployment compensation ("sign-your-name") from the garment job while the industry was in decline because she enjoyed the time off even if she was collecting only a portion of her regular wages.

Many of the women felt that the instability of the garment industry usurped

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<sup>12</sup>However, we must make the distinction that much of the instability in the garment industry at this time was caused by the decrease in the work received by the shops here and not necessarily inherent to the industry.

the potential wage of a garment job. For instance, one woman describes that the closing down of the shop she was working in, Andy's, was drawn out through two to three years during which time it was very difficult for her to make any money.

Most women agree that the wages in the food service jobs are more stable and constant now because of a set hourly pay rate, the set time for work (the hours), and better because of the higher rate of the wages. One woman is getting \$7.40/hour and the woman in the plastics manufacturing factory makes \$5/hour.

However, even though the wage may be constant in these new jobs, there appears to be a great deal of instability in the time of work as well. If one is employed by the university dining hall's food service, for instance, the work lasts for only eight months out of the year, corresponding to the academic schedule. If one is employed by a food catering service, the work is seasonal as well - half the year is busy, namely spring (April, May, and June) and summer (July, August, and September). Neither of these is Full-Time Year-Round employment. In fact, in the food catering service, one may work a variable 5, 6, or 7 hours a day even though the rate of pay is constant at \$7+/hour. One woman describes her wage at an university dining hall job: she collects unemployment compensation for summer and Christmas



vacations - summer vacation which amounts to 158 days of unemployment and Christmas vacation which amounts to one month of unemployment - the number of days unemployed are actually more than that, but "they" claim that the workers are compensated at half of the pay they would get regularly. The woman at the JH cafeteria testifies to the following part-time work schedules: some workers work the maximum of 39 hours/week!<sup>13</sup>, others like herself work 30 hours/week, and still others work only 24 hours/week.

Finally, there a couple of women who feel that the wages received from the garment job and the new food service job even out to about the same amount.

In general, then, for these women, the difference between the garment and food service wages is that the garment wages have been less dependable whereas the food service wages are set at a constant rate and therefor feel more stable to these women. However, it is important to see that the food service wages are also unstable because they do not come from Full-Time Year-Round jobs, but rather are dependent on the academic schedule or are seasonal in demand, have unemployment compensation incorporated into their wage offering, and may be "regular" but only part time work. Thus, these

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<sup>13</sup>These hours are suspiciously close to the full time work of 40 hours a week. What does the employer have to lose in hiring the workers for that extra hour?

women have only switched from one type of contingent work<sup>14</sup> to another: from sub-contracting "full-time" work in the garment shops to sub-contracting part-time work in cafeterias.

We can also see that these women find the wages in both the garment jobs and the food service jobs acceptable (although, as already noted acceptable probably because they had no alternatives for jobs or wages) and are not thinking of themselves as an exploited group by comparison with other groups.<sup>15</sup>

#### COMPARE HEALTH INSURANCE COVERAGE IN OLD & NEW JOBS

Health insurance was and is covered in both the garment and now the food service and plastics manufacturing jobs; although in the garment work, the insurance was extended by the union and now (since there is no union for the food service industry nor the plastics manufacturing factory) it is extended directly by the employer. One woman prefers the Health Management Organization (HMO) now offered by her new job.

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<sup>14</sup>As explained by Bluestone & Harrison, 1988, and as briefly described by me on page 3 of this paper.

<sup>15</sup>Which is often how political economists, social researchers, and other observers see them.

It appears that, to these women, there is little difference in health insurance coverage from their old and new jobs.

#### COMPARE VACATION TIME & PAY IN OLD & NEW JOBS

In the garment jobs, there was no time off for vacation but there was pay that compensated for the time. This pay was a percent of that year's total wages. If one decided to actually take time off, there was no additional compensation pay. In the food service jobs now, there is compensated vacation time. Some women prefer to have the time off now in the food service work. This may be one or two weeks after one year of work and two weeks after two to four years of work.

In sum, there was vacation pay but no time off in the garment work and now there is paid vacation time off in the food service work. The women seem to prefer to have the time off that they do now in the food service work.

#### COMPARE SICK TIME & PAY IN OLD & NEW JOBS

In the garment jobs, there was no sick time or pay. Now, in the food service jobs, there is sick time and pay; this can range from two days a year,

to six days a year, to twelve days a year. The plastics manufacturing job allows two sick days a year. However, in some cases in the catering food service jobs, if one needed sick days beyond the allotted time, one must verify this on the insurance (claim).

It appears that the garment jobs are worse in terms of sick time and pay and that the food service and plastics manufacturing jobs offer significantly better benefits in terms of compensated sick time.

#### COMPARE UNIONIZATION & UNION FEES IN OLD & NEW JOB

In the garment jobs, there was a union and there were union dues at about \$15 a year. Now in the food service and plastics manufacturing jobs, there are no unions. However, we must look at the benefits of having a union versus not having one (ie. wages, vacation and sick time & pay, health insurance, work time, etc.) in order to draw any conclusions about the benefits of unionization. One woman pointed out that other service jobs such as in restaurants and offices are not unionized as well.

The presence of a union in itself is not indicative of better working conditions, at least not unless we can verify it by specific benefits. This point has been made by Wong:

"Even with unionization, many of the sweatshop conditions and

abuses still persist." (Wong, 1983:362)

However, the presence of a union may curtail potential exploitations.

## COMPARE WORK TIME REQUIRED BY OLD & NEW JOBS

In the garment jobs, the total amount of time to work and the hours of the day to do the work (schedule) were up to you. There was no minimum amount of time to work, although people generally spent eight hours a day maximum at work. There was a great degree of "freedom" in deciding one's hours of work: you could arrive at work whenever you wanted; and if something special came up, you didn't have to work. This was possible because the work was piecemeal in nature.

This flexibility of time in the garment job is in stark contrast to the set amount of time and hours in which to work in the food service and the plastics manufacturing jobs. In some places, eight hours a day is required and in other places, 30 hours a week is the minimum amount of time to work. The hours for work are set so that the women feel that they must structure their time around a pre-determined schedule (ie. they feel that they cannot be up late on worknights in order to get enough sleep the night before). Because the hours in which they do the work is set, it is difficult to find a substitute for their job quickly when something comes up.

However, even though the time required to work may be set and therefore the job and its wages seem stable and constant to some of these women, the food service work may, in fact, be unstable. Again, as I have pointed out these women have only switched from one type of contingent work<sup>16</sup> to another: from sub-contracting work in the garment shops to sub-contracting and part-time work in cafeterias.

Thus, these food service jobs are not Full-Time Year-Round jobs; some are part-time jobs and it seems that employers are intentional in structuring part-time jobs, which provides them with greater control over the of costs and the flexibility of workers.<sup>17</sup>

In addition, one woman thinks that the work time that is required by the food service job (4 AM get up, 6 AM at work until 2:30 PM) is too demanding for a "housewife."

The difference in the work time required by the garment and food service jobs is important. In the garment jobs, work time was up-to-you. In fact,

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<sup>16</sup>Please refer to footnote 14.

<sup>17</sup>This is obviously to the disadvantage of the worker. This finding supports Bluestone & Harrison, Standing, and Christophersons' assertions about the increase in the use of part-time workers.

this was the one aspect of the garment job that these women liked best; they all referred to the "freedom" of the garment job. They understand and can feel the constraints of required work time in the new food service jobs; they feel the regimentation of the hours in which they must work, the amount of time they must work, and the difficulty in getting out of this when they need to. The advantages of the flexibility of work time in garment jobs has also been discussed both in the literature such as the Report on Immigration, Wong, and by other observers such as the union official, and the job developer. Furthermore, the characteristic of interdependence such as that in the food service jobs has been distinguished as a element of "worse" jobs by Bookman.

#### COMPARE EASE TO GET TIME OFF IN OLD & NEW JOB

In the garment work, it was easy to get time off; and absences did not really affect the productivity of the shop. This "freedom" or flexibility of time was especially needed by women with children. One woman explains that you only needed to tell the supervisor about taking time off for vacations or if you wanted to collect unemployment compensation - otherwise after two weeks of absence, the supervisor may give your space to some else looking for work.

Now, in the food service jobs, it is difficult to get time off; the work time is

inflexible because "no-one can do the work for you" easily or quickly.

Obviously, the ease with which one can get time off in the old and new jobs is directly and closely related to the time required to work in the old and new jobs respectively. Again, the contrast between the freedom of time in the garment job and the inflexibility of time in the food service jobs is important. Two women, one of them with young children, believe that the flexibility of time is necessary for a woman with children, especially if you don't want a babysitter or daycare arrangement for the children.<sup>18</sup>

#### COMPARE RELATIONS WITH SUPERVISOR OF OLD & NEW JOBS

In the garment jobs, co-workers in the production part of the work and the supervisors were practically, if not all, Chinese. All the women said that their relationships with their co-workers and their supervisors were fine.

The women report that they do not have problems with the supervisor in the new food service jobs nor the plastics manufacturing job even though the supervisor is not Chinese. However, they do describe the tension they

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<sup>18</sup>See page 6 of this paper for Christopherson and Standings' description of the consequence for women from an inflexibility of work-time such as resorting to daycare they can't afford or dropping out of the labor force altogether.



experience with their non-Chinese (usually black or Latin women) co-workers under the division of tasks directed by the supervisors. For instance, because black workers refuse to perform tasks (which may not have been included in their job description) and the Chinese won't refuse if they aren't busy, the Chinese get more work when the supervisor begin to take advantage of this difference. This is felt as unfair by the Chinese women. In other cases, the Chinese don't get scolded on the job and others do because the Chinese "do their job, are not lazy, and do not abuse their work time." One woman explains another source of tension: when the nightshift of the dining hall does not clean up completely, the morning shift, of which she is a part, must first clean up and then proceed with their responsible daily task of food preparation. The same woman does not have much direct supervision, but rather her duties, namely preparing the daily meals, are written in English on a bulletin board. Because her reading of English is not good, she would prefer that her supervisor spoke directly to her about what she needs to prepare for that day.

We can see that the women did not have any major problems with the supervision in their garment jobs, but now have some difficulty with, not so much the supervisors, but rather with the co-workers under the division of tasks as directed by the supervisors. I believe that this tension with fellow co-workers is caused by lack of communication, cultural barriers, and

misunderstanding between the different racial/ethnic group of women workers.

## COMPARE COMFORT OF SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT IN OLD & NEW JOBS

In the garment work, all the workers were Chinese; this was comfortable for these women. They had "fun;" work could be enjoyable for them. They helped each other with sewing new styles.

When there is also a sizable number of Chinese women in their new food service jobs, these women are more comfortable and have more "fun."

Sometimes, in the food service work, men will help carry heavier items which makes the atmosphere more congenial for these women.

However, for the most part, the women surveyed felt tension with their co-workers stemming in part from the racial/ethnic differences. The women complain of teasing from black and Latin women co-workers who compete for overtime and for the lighter work. Another considers the black and Latin co-workers unkind. Sometimes, at the dining hall jobs, there is only one Chinese person and knowledge of English is consequently more necessary than it was before in the garment jobs.

It seems that the Chinese women preferred the social environment of the garment work they experienced because of the homogeneity of the group: they were all Chinese women and had almost everything in common (culture & norms, language, class, etc). Now, in their new food service jobs, they are suddenly with different groups of people, namely, working- class women but who are black and Latin and tension between the groups exists. However, it is unclear whether this tension exists because there is a new group of workers introduced into already established norms or whether it is because these are Chinese women coming in. (It would be helpful to know if these black and Latin women are immigrants or not - to help determine whether the teasing is part of the attempt to get the new Chinese workers to understand the norms of the work relations. It could be that since the black and Latin women have been at the jobs longer, they have already established a set of hard-won "rules" between management and themselves and that this new group of women are sabotaging this.)

#### **COMPARE WORK PROCESS (FLEXIBILITY) IN OLD & NEW JOBS**

One of (if not the) most important differences between the comfort of the old and new jobs for these women stems from the difference in their processes of production. In the garment work, the tasks of producing a garment were divided in such a way that the stitcher was completely responsible for the

sewing of the garment which gave the stitchers a certain control - again refer to Bookman's indices for "worse" and "better" jobs and the job developer's assertion that the garment job offered more control - over the pace they worked at, the amount of work they did, and their hours, thereby giving them a sense of being "in charge" and of being "self-employed." It also allowed them to substitute for one another's work if the need arose, providing to some degree the "freedom" that they enjoyed most about the garment work.

However, a couple of women pointed to some disadvantages of this system: this very division of tasks made it difficult for co-workers to help sew styles someone may be having difficulty with and this division of tasks gave rise to your own work, and therefore, "self-rush."

This "freedom" that they enjoyed is all but gone in the food service work. And this stems from the fact that the division of tasks in this work is such that the work is more regimented and interdependent. This greater interdependence in the production process has already been identified by Bookman as one of the characteristics of a "worse" job since it suppresses the control of the worker over her own job. This regimentation and interdependence in the work process cause the set hours and set work. They also cause the difficulty in getting substitution for one's job when the need

arose, as well as a newly felt external time pressure in doing tasks within a certain time. In the approximate words of one woman who understood clearly this difference in the work process of the two jobs, "the new work requires the coordination of workers doing specific pieces of work in order to produce the resultant product - work is more interdependent amongst workers now." In fact, there is an external time pressure now to have certain tasks done in a certain amount of time because of this interdependency in the production process. This external time pressure causes an anxiety not felt before.

Thus, this aspect of the shift from one job to the other is not favorable to these women. Indeed, it is one of the aspects they dislike most about the new food service jobs. (This difference between the process of production in the garment jobs and the food service jobs causes the difference between the "work time required" and the "ease to get time off" in the garment and food service jobs.)

#### COMPARE TRAVEL COSTS (PROXIMITY) OF OLD & NEW JOBS

Differences in travel costs (which are determined in part by the proximity of home and work) with the change in jobs were not possible to calculate - or maybe irrelevant, in fact, because these costs depend on the unique home and

work locations which have shown to be so diverse both then and now. This finding of diverse home and job locations is contrary to my expectations; I was thinking that more of the women would live in Boston, if not around Chinatown. This was an assumption shared by the ET funder along with her assertion that the new jobs would get the women out beyond the community which has turned out to be false. Perhaps it is this diversity of home locations which needs further investigation.

### GENERAL PREFERENCE BETWEEN OLD & NEW JOBS

Most generally then, the women liked the "freedom" and convenience of work time flexibility in the garment work. The worst aspect of the garment work seems to have been physical ie. back strain from sitting all day, and the need for quick hands and good eyesight. Another difficulty of garment work was the difficulty in learning to sew new styles. Finally, the instability of the work (again, not necessarily inherent to the industry) was problematic for them.

For the food service work, it is the lack of "freedom" or the inflexibility of the work time that is most intolerable. There is also a need for English now that is difficult to accommodate. However, the work feels more stable to these women, even though, I add, the jobs are usually not Full-Time Year-

Round jobs.

## INSTABILITY IN FOOD SERVICE JOBS

A couple of women discussed, in fact, this instability of the food service work. One woman said that she should have received a pay increase of +\$.50/hour by November, 1989 but has not yet received this with the reason given of financial cutbacks. She recounts that some workers have had half an hour cut in each work day, so that their work days have been reduced from five work days a week to four work days a week. These events (of no pay increase and the reduction of work time) have cut a sense of job security.

Another woman who has been laid off twice by food service jobs and is currently unemployed explains that many workers that are displaced by the garment jobs are entering into the food service work which has caused an overcrowding of the food service production labor supply, thereby, displacing workers like herself.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps the displacement from manufacturing jobs to service jobs has accelerated to such a pace that the service sector cannot or will not accept all the workforce, thereby building a reserve labor with which

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<sup>19</sup>This supports Standing's assertion about the "crowding" of working-class women at the bottom of the labor market - see page 6.

the industry can suppress wages directly with the threat of unemployment or with the concessions that accompany part-time work.

One woman currently in food service work does not have a dependable number of work hours each day - she may work 4, 5, or 8 hours a day depending on the amount of work to do.

Finally, at the JH cafeteria, workers work only part-time even though they may be given hours up to 39 hours/week, others 30 and 24 hours/week.

This, again, adds to the evidence that these new food service jobs are not Full-Time Year-Round jobs and are not stable, countering the idea held by many, including these women themselves, that the "new" jobs are stable in contrast to the garment jobs which are unstable.

### Family/Household

## HOUSEHOLD DUTIES AND THE JOB

In most households, the women (wife & mother) do most of the housework. Sometimes they do all the housework. Often the woman is the cook. She is sometimes the one who does the laundry and washes the floor and she often does the shopping for household use. The woman is very often the primary



caretaker of the children and the elderly; these particular responsibilities require her to juggle her household tasks and her job outside the home. For instance, as two women recount: one used to have to pick up her daughter from Lincoln School and bring her to a daycare center during her lunch time from the garment shop. Her older son would then pick up this sister from the day care after his school. The division of household tasks is displayed here as well as the use of the flexibility of work time in the garment industry which enabled her to accomplish this task.<sup>20</sup> Another woman had to put her young daughter in a barrel of fabric next to her sewing machine in the garment factory because there was no day care available at the time.<sup>21</sup> The women who have been here longer believe that the recent immigrants have an easier time now with the increase in social services created by the start-up of Chinatown social service agencies by the government, and with the increase in the number of friends and relatives already here.

The youngest woman interviewed, whose children are still young, talked about the reason she left her garment job: before she got married she worked in a garment shop and even took work home during the nights; after she was

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<sup>20</sup>See Redclift & Mingione in this paper on page 7 for a description of women and their need to perform multiple simultaneous tasks.

<sup>21</sup>See the description of this flexibility of garment work from the Report on Immigration cited on page 24 of this paper and on the work of the women in Chinese working-class families described by Nakano-Glenn and cited in this paper on page 28.

married she continued to work in the garment shop but did not take work home; after she had her first child, she paid for babysitting four days of the week @ \$10-\$12/day when she and her husband were working - she took care of the children on the weekends when she was off and he took care of the child on his weekday off (restaurant jobs don't have weekends off); when she had her second child, it would have cost her  $2 \times \$12 = \$24$  a day to have both children babysat; this was more than she could make, thus, "she decided" to stay home to take care of the children until they were old enough for daycare or school.<sup>22</sup>

Now her husband drops the children off at daycare or school and she picks them up in the afternoon, which is only possible since she gets off at 3 PM (part time job at JH). Other jobs such as clerical that get out later would make it problematic for parents with young children, she adds. She considers other jobs now available for Chinese women such as hotel service, electronics assembly, and pharmaceutical manufacturing restrictive. She considers this development a dispersion of jobs available for Chinese women a freeing of the confinement of gender-specific jobs.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Please refer to footnote 18.

<sup>23</sup>The accuracy of this view is questionable since the new jobs continue to be divided along gender lines.

The husband may vacuum on his day off or before he goes to work (ie. in the afternoon), wash dishes, do the laundry, buy food, or help take care of the children. Only one woman said that her husband didn't help much with the household work.

However, even if the husband does not help out with the household work, the women seem to excuse their lack of help with the difficulty of their jobs in the restaurant. For instance, two women say that the work time of her husband in the restaurant work makes it impossible for him to be at home around dinner time - so, she must cook for the children; another woman says that although her husband makes higher wages (in restaurant work) than she does, his job is also very difficult - a restaurant job is very hot in the summer.

The younger woman with children believes that for couples with young children, the husband and wife must cooperate in order to make the household work; that is, he takes care of the children in the day and she takes care of them at night.

However, her description of their schedule is misleading, I think, because her husband only needs to drop off the children at school in the morning,

whereas she not only picks up the children in the afternoon but also she must cook, care, and be with them for the remainder of the day. In addition, if their husbands don't help much with the household work, the women can excuse them with the difficulty of their work in the restaurant (although their own juggling of tasks creates significant strain in itself). Again, this points to the subtle nature of the division of tasks that both men and women have accepted systematically so that it is difficult for even women to see the divisions and their implications more clearly.

Sometimes the children help out with household work such as taking out the garbage and vacuuming now that they are grown. One woman says that her children helped out with her garment work at home when she had to take on homework to care for the children; they reversed belts, etc.

Caring for children at home and performing garment homework were relatively compatible tasks for these women. We can see that for a woman with young children and without daycare, garment work offered the time flexibility that was needed to carry out her household tasks and her job outside the home and it offered homework which enabled them to perform both these tasks simultaneously. (Besides the fact that at home, even the children helped with the garment homework.)

## HOMework IN THE GARMENT INDUSTRY

Given that homework was necessary for the women to carry out their household tasks and earn a wage in a job, many women did indeed take on garment homework. Most often they did it to take care of children at home. However, homework offered much less pay because there was no percent added on top of the hourly wage when working at home and no benefits compared to stitching garments at the shop itself. Homework resulted in less than half the pay as in the shop and withheld health insurance coverage. Obviously, homework was not the most desirable way to earn a wage but as one woman puts it "she didn't have any other choice, she saw everyone around doing it." Indeed, the "boss" delivered the fabric-to-be-sewn to the homes of those women with children. However, one woman explains that the factory was delivering too much for her to do, so she decided to work for another factory that didn't deliver in order to control the amount of work she got and to reduce the strain. After her children grew up, she began to work seven or eight hours a day at the shop instead. The youngest women recounted that before she was married she brought home homework after the regular hours at the shop (until 5 PM), ate dinner which was prepared by her mother, and continued to sew the homework at night.

There are some women who did not take on garment homework for various

reasons. One simply worked half-days until her children were old enough to take to day care at which time she began to work full time. Another woman did not do any garment homework because she was a seam presser and the seam pressing machines were too expensive to buy on her own.

In sum, garment homework was exploitative of women with children who didn't have any alternatives but to choose homework as a wage job so that they could also care for the children. Although the women found their juggling of tasks difficult they did not necessarily feel that it was exploitative. This exploitation hidden from the women themselves we can argue is common in both the household and in the job as exemplified by the uneven division of tasks and the work and wages, respectively. This "expropriation" in both spheres is systematically linked as argued by Nakano-Glenn.<sup>24</sup> The delivering of homework to the home of women with young children by the "bosses" was not necessarily a generous act (as may be seen by the women themselves).

## **MONEY IN THE HOUSEHOLD**

Most women said that they and their husbands pool their money simply in checking or saving accounts and that they both make decisions about

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<sup>24</sup>See citations of Nakano-Glenn on page 9 and of Redclift & Mingione on page 7 of this paper.

spending the money. Only one woman said that he makes decisions about spending the money. Others say that the husband makes more money from the restaurant work but that they both make decisions about spending the money or that they have a division of purchases - she buys the food, he pays for other things. Again, there is the hint of providing an excuse or giving credit to the husband as one woman described her husband as someone who doesn't spend a lot on himself ie. he doesn't drink coffee or smoke cigarettes.

To me, it seems from both this question of the decisions about spending money in the household and the previous question about the division of tasks in the household that the women are quick to cover for their husbands; they quickly make excuses for them or focus on his merits (perhaps even at their own expense in order to maintain a harmonious family life?)

### Friends/Social Network

## COMPARE FRIENDS & SOCIAL NETWORK IN OLD & NEW JOBS

The women interviewed agreed that they met most of their friends through their jobs (especially from their garment work since everyone there was Chinese). One explained that since only a few of her relatives were here in

Boston (they're mostly in San Francisco), she needed to make friends around here. Another woman explained that since she doesn't play "mah duek," she can only make friends through work. You can also make friends when you see the same people regularly on the bus or shopping in Chinatown and start talking to them. In addition, if you changed garment shops often, you were apt to know more people.

There were several kinds of "help" these friends from work in the garment shop provided. Jobs contacts were often made through these co-workers. The Chinese women all told each other how to do the work ie. how to sew a new style of garment. Last but not least, these Chinese women had a good time talking and laughing together. Because there were more Chinese women in the garment work, the Chinese women interviewed felt they had more opportunity to make friends there. The fewer number of Chinese women and the barriers of culture and language with women of other ethnic backgrounds in their new food service jobs limits their friend-making opportunities.

In the food catering business, there may be more Chinese women employed than in a university dining hall, in which case, the women feel more comfortable. At JH, there are a sizable number of Chinese there, from 10-20, some of who are in an up-scale restaurant that was reserved for CEOs



until recently; thus, the Chinese perform various kinds of tasks within the cafeteria and restaurant: cooks/kitchen work, servers, dish washers, and waitresses. This division of tasks is different from that of the garment industry in which work was divided by gender and ethnicity which Bookman, Berger, and Ackelsberg conclude contribute to solidarity and class consciousness.

Generally, however, in their new jobs in food service work, these women agree that there are fewer opportunities to make friends because there aren't as many Chinese to make friends with now. One woman interviewed is the only Chinese person at one college dining hall. Consequently, the Chinese women need more English now in their new jobs. When there are other Chinese at the food service work, they can help each other with the English. However, one woman says that the talking is only related to the job and more personal things don't get talked about because people may be sensitive and it would provide a source of gossip within the group.

Indeed, in the food service jobs now, not only do the women have less opportunities to make friends, they feel a certain tension with the other groups of women workers, namely black and Latin women. One woman said that these other women tease the Chinese women and compete with them for overtime and the less heavy work. Another explained that the work

environment is not the same now because black and Latin women are not kind to them (the Chinese women).

In sum, the women have explained the need to make Chinese friends, the greater opportunity to make them in the garment work, and the less opportunity to make them in their new food service work now. In fact, not only do they make fewer friends in their new jobs, there is tension divided along possibly racial/ethnic or along old and new worker lines.

#### OPPORTUNITIES FOR GATHERING THEN (OLD) & NOW (NEW JOBS)

The women interviewed explained that they manage to keep in touch with their many old friends from their garment jobs by meeting for coffee, brunch, and for gambling (mah duek). However, most of them gather only once in a while during special occasions and celebrations (weddings, births, etc.) One telling reason for the sparse times for gathering is described by one woman: her friends and she have different work times now because they are not in the same factory anymore, nor are they even in the same industry anymore, so that the only times they can get together are during mutual times off for brunch and on special occasions and celebrations. Other women who work in hotel service, pharmaceutical manufacturing, or electronics may have to work

on weekends, but as the woman at JH cafeteria explains, she never has any overtime to make more money on the weekends.

Some women say that they have also made some friends through church (the few of them who attended briefly) and through the Chinese Progressive Association (CPA). Another way to meet friends is to gamble or play "mah duek." But most friends have been made at work.

Thus, not only do the new jobs have fewer opportunities for the Cantonese women to make friends of the same group but these new jobs also structure their outside lives so that they make it more difficult for these women to gather outside of the workplace. Since Bookman, Berger, and Ackelsberg have argued for the grouping of the same ethnicity and gender as positive for solidarity, class conscious, and political activism building, these new jobs have not served well in these aspects and may seriously undermine these womens' support systems and vehicles for potential political leverage.

#### Self-comparison of Jobs/Self-perception & Future

When asked about the kind of job they wanted after they were displaced from the garment shop, one woman with a particularly strong sense of humor, replied that she wanted a food service job because she likes food she

can eat. Another woman responded that, in fact, she really didn't want another kind of "job," meaning she didn't want to go into another industry; she didn't know what kind of job she wanted - only that the garment job was fine for her wage-wise if there was work to do. Besides, garment work provided the "freedom" or flexibility of time she enjoyed so much - she could go have coffee or go shopping whenever she wanted, she could take time off whenever she wanted - even though you needed good eyesight to stitch garments.

The youngest woman interviewed knew about the cafeteria in JH because friends of hers already worked there. However, her second child was too young for her to work. But since the job application may have a wait up to 2 years (or until someone leaves or retires from the job), she applied in advance. As foreseen, she was hired at about the time her youngest entered school.<sup>25</sup>

One woman originally wanted an office, bank, or other clerical job after her Employment Training (ET) program, but because of her lack of English, she could not achieve this. Another woman had a similar experience: she felt

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<sup>25</sup>This long wait for a food service job would imply that there is competition for even part-time jobs. This, in turn, would imply that there is already an over-supply of workers for these part-time subcontracted service jobs as projected by Standing - see page 6 of this paper.

she was, in some ways, tracked into food service work because she didn't know English, and thus, couldn't do the office work, which was the only other choice (besides food service) in the ET program.

There were two women besides the youngest woman interviewed who were not clients of the ET programs and found their new jobs also in the food service work through friends she knew at the job or through newspaper ads. These two women were also the ones who knew more English than the others interviewed. The one who found her job through newspaper ads first got a job in the food service of a hospital, but was uncomfortable with the setting of a hospital (with people who are sick - and her responsibility of food preparation for them in which she could err and cause problems for a patient) and thus found another food service job in the university dining hall instead. She has stayed with the food service company although she has changed the university dining hall she's working for.

One woman looked at her new job with a more positive attitude; she believes that she can learn new things from her new food service job: she can learn more English, different kinds of kitchen work, western things like work process, foods, etc.

For women with children who have since grown up, life, in terms of

managing household tasks and a job outside, is easier now.

When asked about what kind of job she would ideally like to have, the youngest women said that "since she doesn't know English, there's nothing to want; she has health insurance from the job and it is easier to pass the time with the job, so that the job is acceptable to her; she doesn't ask for too much; if you're born here and know English, that's a different story; for her, she likes her job and the health insurance." She added: "here in the US, it is money that matters, not the prestige of the job; so what if the name of the job sounds good, what if the wages are lower? For instance, office work compared with garment work. What would be the use of a name when the reason for coming to the US is to make money?"

Of those older women (only excluding the youngest) asked about their future plans, all replied that they will continue with their work in the food service at dining halls until they retire (which is for most in the not-too-distant future). However, one woman currently wants another job, also in food service work. She thinks, however, that her English is not good enough to get through an interview in English in order to get another food service job. She seem to understand the barrier to her goal quite clearly: even though she may have experience in food service work, she would not be able to convey this to the interviewer because of her limited English, so how can she

get another job? Because she is not yet at a retirement age and because of her lack of English, she must stay at her job. She is close to 60 years old and she can collect social security at 62.

I feel that this self-explanation of why someone must stay at her job even though she wants another is quite poignant; this woman understands what her skills are, is ready to convey them, but believes that her English is not good enough to convey them at an interview, and therefore is tending to resign herself towards staying at a less than satisfying job. This is only one example in which the women have felt English to be their main barrier to the kind of job they ideally want. This barrier may indeed be there, but it may not be the only one (supply vs. demand or structural reason with the labor market issues) - the women usually feel it is their own lack of qualifications that prohibit their getting the jobs they want. Age is another self-perceived obstacle.

The women most often want office, bank, or clerical jobs when they were dislocated from the garment industry, although a few may be not too willing to get out of the garment work because of the "freedom" of time it offers. However, the obstacles they most often feel that prohibit them from getting the jobs they want are their own qualifications, namely their lack of English and their older age.

### Related Issue of Political Activism by Cantonese Women Workers

Besides the above issues that were raised, there were other important realms related to their political consciousness or their displacement from the garment industry that need to be described.

It is important to discuss their political consciousness as described by themselves: first, it is important to note that some of the women working at P&L Sportswear asked for a shuttle bus to get to work in East Boston after P&L had relocated to East Boston. When more than 50 people requested the shuttle bus, it was granted. Then, when the other women saw that it was "ok" to proceed in this new arrangement (of riding a bus to East Boston), they decided to join the group. In the end, there were 3 shuttle buses picking up workers in Chinatown (in front of the ILGWU) at 7 AM daily.

However, when P&L closed down, displaced all its workers, and a State start-up of an ET program did not happen, and the community activist organization, CPA, began demanding an ET program on these women's behalf, only a handful of women participated in the demonstrations. The women joined the demonstration to demand their rights only when they could



see the concrete benefits to them if they did so. Many of them feared association with the CPA because they saw it as a communist organization and were thus fearful about having their pictures taken during a demonstration with the CPA.

A long-time community political activist with the CPA reports that some of the women may have been hesitant to join in the demand for government employment training services because of the history of arrests and deportations of Chinese in Boston's Chinatown during the era of McCarthyism in which the FBI collaborated with the Kuo Ming Tong on Chinese suspected of affiliation with the Communist Party. Thus, the women had reason to fear for security if they participated in activism against the state.

In addition, because the CPA tried to establish positive ties with China before the US normalization with China was underway, some people in the community may have mistaken this for the CPA's affiliation with the Communist Party. This would have caused many to avoid the organization because the Chinese immigrants in the US have for the most part fled the conditions in China, part of which since the 1940s, have been the communist regime. Therefore, many of them would not have looked favorably on any organization which was thought to have such a link.

Finally, many of the women and probably much of the community simply didn't understand the governing laws on activism vis-a-vis the state; some of them asked if it was legal to openly demonstrate against the government.

Nonetheless, as already cited, eventually many of the dislocated garment workers joined the protest for with-held services with the help of the CPA. Indeed, the CPA had been an impressive community organization based on its accomplishments on behalf of community members and on the trust bestowed upon it by community members. This trust is best evidenced when members of the community approach the organization for help in dealing with the larger society ie. massive job lay-offs or racial violence.

Most of the women felt that, although they were reluctant to join at first, the CPA was helpful to them in their agenda and the union wasn't. One woman explained that after P&L closed shop in 1985, the workers requested an extension of health insurance coverage and other benefits from the ILGWU, but the union refused. Instead, the union suggested that they go to certain shops that had jobs available, but these weren't really available jobs because these vacancies were actually spaces at machines that were broken.

#### Observations of These Informants Themselves

An interesting understanding of one of the woman interviewed is that with regard to the wages in the garment industry (at least before), wages were better in the garment shops in Boston than in the shops in San Francisco because there, garment shops were not unionized and where the work was "turned-over many hands" or subcontracted and resulted in the cheaper wages.<sup>26</sup>

The women understood that other jobs their displaced co-workers had gone into were pharmaceutical manufacturing, hotel service, electronics, and office work.

One woman hears that the garment work is better now than it was a little while ago; that is, that the garment industry is rising or stabilizing again.

It is interesting that the women who immigrated here earlier (20+ years) think that the increase in social services recently (but actually since the early-mid 1970s) have made things easier for recent immigrants; social services such as the Chinese American Civic Association, government funded services, day care, and the increase of Chinese ie. friends and relatives here provide benefits they, the earlier immigrants, didn't have. I question, however, the

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<sup>26</sup>The low wages may be due more to low levels of unionization in San Francisco than the existence of a contracting arrangement because contracting is done in Boston as well. However, wages aren't so great here either.

availability of these services as the huge influx of immigration in the last two decades (since the 1970s) may have easily outgrown the capacity of such programs and facilities.

## Conclusion

My findings are confirmed by previous survey responses on the reasons Chinese women enter the garment industry as documented by Wong, 1983.

"The San Francisco commission found that 48% of the women felt that garment work was the only type they could do. This seems quite realistic when one realizes that the garment workers are predominantly recent immigrants, with about 85% having less than six years of formal education and about 70% stating that they have only "limited" facility with the English language. Six reasons Chinese women garment workers in New York Chinatown gave (in order of importance) for working as garment workers are: (1) ease of getting a job; (2) don't have to ride the bus or subway to get to work; (3) flexible schedule; (4) don't speak English; (5) can learn job proficiency in about a week; and (6) social and informal atmosphere in factory (Sung, 1975:129). The most favorable opinion toward working in Chinatown factories in Los Angeles concerned the flexibility of the shop hours. As opposed to the shops in the downtown area, the shops in Chinatown do not have fixed working hours for the workers, regardless of whether they were unionized. As a consequence, the workers had the freedom to come and go at just about any time of the day (or night) as long as they had previously arranged their hours with the owners so that their absence would not impede production. Hence, the workers could go shopping, fetch their children at school, take care of family errands, and sew at their own pace (since they were paid piece-rate). Furthermore, many workers also did their work at home. Other favorable comments were that it provided work for non-English-speaking immigrants who could not find jobs elsewhere; there was less alienation while working, as many of their friends worked in the shop; one could dress informally and hence save money on clothes and cosmetics; it was a good occupation for elderly women (Li, et

al., 1975:25-26)...

The Chinatown sweatshop, in spite of its oppressive and exploitative nature, represents more than just an economic institution, but a way of life.

'To the newly arrived immigrant seamstress it is a place where she can go to be with her own kind, where the local gossip is exchanged, and where news regarding the mainland of China is also exchanged. In general, it is a manifestation of her culture, embodying all that she is familiar with. It is a home away from home. As such, it is a social institution, and it is what makes it different from a typical American place of work. (The Report, 1969:67-68)' (Wong, 1983:368; my emphasis)

In brief, I am arguing that the Cantonese women who have been laid off by the garment industry may not be "better off" in their lives with the change into the food service jobs. The essence of this argument is that the "ethnic enclave" or the work with one predominant ethnic group of workers such as the Chinese women in the garment work had a value. First, garment work, with its employment of almost all Chinese women, gave the women solidarity and comfort at the workplace within a larger society which was foreign to them. This solidarity stemming from a common ethnicity and gender has been shown to be positive for political activism by Bookman in her discussion of the unionization of Portuguese women, by Berger in her discussion of South African women workers, and by Ackelsberg in her discussion of ethnic working-class women in US cities. Second, the garment work with its flexibility of time, which is absent in the food service work, worked well for women who had to take care of their children as well as make some money.

However, it is this division of household tasks and its link to the job outside that should be the point of question as to its fairness and its contribution to the "well-being" of these women.

My argument is supported by evidence from the interviews. What is considered "bad" in the garment work are its instability of wages, its physical discomforts, and less importantly, the difficulty in learning to sew new styles. However, as we have seen the food service work has instability as well; jobs can be insecure, daily work hours may vary, and jobs are part-time.

What is considered "bad" about the food service jobs are its inflexibility of work time, its requirement of English, and the tension with ethnically different co-workers. However, the garment work has precisely the flexibility of time, the "freedom," which these women enjoyed and perhaps needed so much to manage their multiple tasks. The requirement of English at the "new" food service jobs is difficult for these women to meet; their tight schedules of household tasks and the job prohibit them from having the time to learn English in a classroom. The tension they feel with other co-workers in the workplace is related and also difficult to overcome. I argue that the English requirement, the tension with co-workers, and the fewer number of Chinese women at the workplace may contribute to a considerable amount of "disempowerment" rather than to the supportive environment, camaraderie,

solidarity, development of "class consciousness," and potential for political organizing and activism demonstrated by the Cantonese women in the garment jobs.

## 5. RELEVANT ARGUMENTS AND CONCLUSION

### Summary of Study & Question

In my case-study, I have looked at the consequences of increased international market competition for the US garment industry on a local level. In particular, I have looked at the consequences of garment job loss for a small number of Cantonese immigrant women workers in Boston. I have found that these women have transferred from the garment industry into the service sector, particularly into food service. My primary purpose then was to determine how these "new jobs" compared with their "old jobs" for the Cantonese women workers.

I have gathered opinions from those involved with these Cantonese women in their job change, both in support of and against the old jobs. I have also found literature that support the argument that there are more "advantages" to the women workers in the old jobs. From my findings, I have concluded that the new jobs are "worse" for the women than the old jobs in a number of ways. I will summarize these opinions and literature and add my findings to the discussion of whether the new jobs or the old jobs are good for the well-being of the Cantonese immigrant women workers.



## Opinions & Literature Regarding "Old" and "New" Jobs for Cantonese Women Workers

From opinions of people involved in the job change process of the Cantonese women workers, we have those that are "in favor of new jobs" or, conversely, "against old jobs." In the other camp, we have ideas from both opinions of informants and the relevant literature that are "in favor of old jobs" or, conversely, ideas that are "against new jobs."

### "Against Old Jobs"/"In Favor of New Jobs" Opinions

#### A. "Against Old Jobs" Opinion

Of those whose opinions are "against old jobs," the strongest argument is that of the community activist and the academician and community member that the diversity of the new jobs open to Cantonese women workers will prevent them from being a "sitting duck" as a group which may undergo the mass lay-offs such as they've experienced from the garment industry.

The researcher at the city redevelopment agency, the BRA, believes that since the garment jobs were exploitative of the Cantonese women and other workers, it is fine that the industry is gone and that we should focus on the

training of this workforce for the new "growth industries."

#### B. "In Favor of New Jobs" Opinion

The administrator and funder of the ET program believes that being in the new jobs will require the Cantonese women to learn English because they are now with non-Cantonese supervisors and co-workers and because of the need to get around the city. This then will translate into their learning English and being more "empowered" to deal with the "larger society."

#### "Against New Jobs"/"In Favor of Old Jobs" Opinions and Literature

##### A. "Against New Jobs" Opinion and Literature

Literature which support the argument "against new jobs" include Bluestone and Harrison, Standing, and Christophersons' observations about the increase in the use of contingent work of employers to cut labor costs under the current "profit squeeze." This increased use of contingent labor robs the worker of higher wages, benefits, and job security.

Even the community activist who believes that the new jobs are good for the women as a group in preventing them from being "sitting ducks," admits that

the new jobs are "still very low-level and dead-end." She also admits that these new jobs are "scattered" and the women may find it "difficult to function and feel support." Unfortunately, she dismisses these discomforts as necessary for the process of change that is "difficult for the initial people - the pioneers."

The job developer from the Bunker Hill ET program provides the strongest testimony against the new jobs. She reports that these women felt particularly insecure at clerical jobs in which the boss is a white male. She estimates that as many as half of those she placed in new jobs, most of the older workers, went back to garment jobs. She also adds that the food service jobs are seasonal and unstable as well.

#### B. "In Favor of Old Jobs" Opinion and Literature

From literature in support of "old jobs," the Report on Immigration documents the flexibility in the garment jobs which allowed women to bring their children to the shop or work home to do.

Wong also cites many of the reasons that Chinese women like garment jobs that I have also found in my survey of Cantonese women. These reasons include a flexibility in the job which enabled the Chinese women to perform

their other work as mothers and wives as well and an amiable atmosphere which created a less alienating work environment.

Bookman, Berger, and Ackelsberg push this idea of the supportive work environment of the common ethnicity and gender beyond comfort and demonstrate that it can be a vehicle for solidarity, the formation of a common class consciousness, and a potential for political organizing. Obviously then common ethnicity and gender at the workplace for vulnerable groups in society such as ethnic working-class women workers may be essential for any potential political leverage in society.

The union official confirms that the Cantonese women like the garment jobs because they feel comfortable being with other Cantonese women and being able share the same culture and even food at work. He adds that they like the work because of its flexibility from its piecework nature. He also believes that they like the garment jobs because of the proximity of the shops to Chinatown where the women need to shop and meet with others.

Finally, the job developer at Bunker Hill ET Program also confirms that the self-pace of the work and the flexibility of the work-time made possible by piecework were ideal for mothers because they could bring children to and from school, cook meals, and in the case of emergencies, didn't have to go in

to work. Indeed, she believes that in the garment jobs, these women were in a sense "in charge" and "self-employed."

The advantages of working in the garment jobs is evidenced by the fact that the job developer knows of Cantonese women who have grown up in US (Boston) and therefor have English skills who still choose to work in the garment industry for its flexibility.

### My Findings & Argument

It can be seen that the Cantonese women workers have simply switched from one kind of contingent work into another: from sub-contracting and "full-time" work in the garment jobs to sub-contracting and part-time work in the food service jobs. Thus, my findings support Bluestone and Harrison, Standing, and Christophersons' argument that the jobs accompanying current economic change are not an improvement over the old jobs.

My findings would also tend to support Redclift and Mingione's assertion that the current economic restructuring has differential impacts on different groups of people, most negatively affecting those groups who have historically accumulated vulnerabilities, namely immigrants, ethnic groups, and women. It seems that the low-wage and unstable garment industry which was the only

segment of manufacturing that was open to these Cantonese immigrant women workers contained the jobs which were quick to go under restructuring, thereby displacing these women and sending them only in a lateral direction to other equally risky jobs as evidenced by the instability of hours and wages in the food service jobs.

My findings also support Redclift and Mingiones' assertion about the increase in time-use for women under restructuring. The new jobs do bring with them an increased rigidity and inflexibility for the women (while the employers have increased their flexibility in the use of the labor through sub-contracting and part-time work). This increased inflexibility for the women touches upon their multiple roles as wage-earners, mothers, wives, and community members. The increased inflexibility has increased the time and energy demand on the womens' lives (especially ethnic working-class womens' lives) because of the close connections they have amongst the various spheres of their lives stemming from their socio-economic position in society.

For the Cantonese women workers in my case-study, the increased rigidity of their food service jobs now constrains them from taking care of their children and from meeting with their peers. Unless, the other spheres will shift to accommodate this increased rigidity in their jobs, they will have to further deplete their income by arranging for daycare for their children, drop out of

the labor force altogether, or simply intensify their time-use.

In addition, the Cantonese women I interviewed feel that there are less opportunities for making new friends and meeting old friends now with their new jobs. This is quite a contrast to the support and "fun" they were able to have in their old jobs. Thus, the new jobs have brought about a feeling of alienation for these women, especially if they are the only Chinese person at their workplace. (In fact, I would argue that the required use of English and the tension now experienced with non-Chinese co-workers have caused a considerable degree of "disempowerment" for these women.)

This argument is also supported by my finding that the Cantonese women have not only gained support from working with their peers in the garment shops, but have also proven to be activists in their old jobs as demonstrated by their demands for a shuttle bus to their work-site and by their demands for an ET program. Now, they are dispersed. Although some are of the opinion that this will lessen their vulnerability in the labor market, they have also lost an important arena for political organizing. In fact, not only are they dispersed in many jobs sites now, their different schedules now even constrain them from gathering even outside of the workplace.

The ET funder's assertion that the Cantonese women will be "empowered" by

the required learning of English, the working with non-Chinese co-workers and supervisors, and the need to travel around the city is disputed by my findings. As we have seen, the Cantonese womens' relations with their supervisors and especially their co-workers are much more antagonistic now than when they were in the garment jobs because of the homogeneity of the latter. In addition, even though they may need to know more English now than they did in their old jobs, that does not mean that they will have the time or access to learn English in the classroom between their job and household work and the scarcity of the ESL classes. In fact, the increased need for English has caused much discomfort for these women and thus, I argue, may be seen as "disempowering" experience for them. Indeed, Bookman, Berger, and Ackelsberg have demonstrated that gender, ethnic, and class commonality are positive factors in the development of support, camaraderie, and political organizing and activism in the workplace and in the community. This commonality is less attainable in the workplace now with their new jobs.

Furthermore, I find the BRA researcher's supply-side prescription of human-capital building for the laid-off garment workers an unconvincing strategy because the "growth industries" that he foresees these workers entering are the service sectors in which many ethnic minorities, immigrants, and women have already entered at the low rung.



Thus, from my case-study, I have found that the job change for the cantonese women is not just economic in terms of jobs, nor is it political in terms of the wage/income effect, but that, in addition, it is political in terms of the potential for political organizing and activism. As I have tried to point out along the way, things are not necessarily getting better for the Cantonese immigrant women worker in Boston under the current development of economic/industrial "restructuring" and the accompanying job opportunities. In fact, as I have concluded, things seem to be getting precarious for these women.

#### Other Conclusions

We should not look upon the current global economic development as unavoidable or unchangeable. In fact, if people like Knox and Agnew are correct about the current global economic developments as reinforcing historical inequity in the distribution of resources across the globe, then we should indeed question and demand change from the current course of development.

If Bluestone and Harrison are correct in their assertion that the US is becoming increasingly polarized in terms of socio-economic status and the few

"rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer," then we must again consider the path we are on. (The increase in the "informal sector" economic activities in the US gives food for thought regarding the course of AICs and capitalist development.)

However, in light of my case-study and my findings, we cannot indiscriminately accept the leftist ideal of a common worker in which particulars don't or shouldn't matter. In fact, as I have tried to show, particulars do matter because people themselves must define their own position or consciousness and decide for themselves action or inaction, however mixed the feelings and ideas of the group.

In the end, I can only report, comment on, and try to clarify the issues of the women workers. Women workers themselves will have to struggle to resolve the circumstances of their lives.

Nonetheless, given the dispersion of the workers now, a constructive course of action may be to create a newsletter or devote a certain section of the community newspaper to the experiences, perceptions, or observations of the Cantonese women about their workplaces, their home lives, the community, or society in general. This may be an important vehicle for support and organizing beyond that of a union, which would be a long-time-in-coming

anyway, since a union for service work would need some time to develop the capacity to deal with Chinese-speaking workers.

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## APPENDIX

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### Questionnaire to Cantonese Women - Formerly Garment Workers

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#### PART I - General Job Status

What was your job as a garment worker - stitcher, cutter, presser?  
Did you quit or were you laid off? Why?  
How long were you working as a garment worker before you quit  
or were laid off? (in ages or years)  
Did you work again after that? In what and beginning when?  
Are you in the same job now? If not, in what and since when?  
How did you find this job?

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#### PART II & III - For Both Old & New Jobs

##### Work/Job

What Kind of Work Did/Do You Do?  
Difficulty of Work (ie. eye/back strain & non-physical difficulties ie.  
language)  
Homework Part of Job & Is It Desirable?  
What Is Best & Worst About the Work?

Wages (level & stability)  
Health Insurance Coverage (extent)  
Vacation Pay(/Time)  
Sick Pay(/Time)  
Other Monetary Compensation  
Payments Out ie. Union Dues, Taxes, Health Insurance

Time Required at Work (how far in advance did/do you know weekly  
schedule?)  
Ease to Get Time Off

Control/Leverage Over Workers (absent OK or fired?)

Relationship/Degree of Comfort with Supervisor, "Boss," &  
Co-workers

Proximity of Workplace to Home (issue or not & why?)

Social Context of Job (who do you talk to about your job?)

##### Family/Household

Members of Household & Respective Ages, Jobs, & Wages

(self  
husband  
children  
parents  
parents-in-law  
siblings & families  
others)

Which Members Required What from You?

What Other Duties in the Household?

What was the Time Involved in These Requirements from Other Members and in the Other Duties?

What is the most & least satisfying parts about being a member of the household? (what does she get in return?)  
"Access to Resources" (how is her wage, etc compared to husband's, etc & is the money pooled? & how is the money allocated?)  
(Who decides what to do with money, if pooled, would she have more say if she earned more money?)

**Friends/Relatives/Social Network**

How Did You Initially Meet (friends & social network)

How Do You Maintain Contact/What are the Opportunities for Gathering? (are they still as prevalent with new job?)

Do These People "Help" You & Do You "Help" Them? How?

Time Involved in These Activities

**Other Components of Life**

ie. Church/Religious, Associations, Organizations (which may actually be discouraged by the men & within the culture

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**PART IV - Self Comparison of Old & New Job & Perception of Opportunities for the Future**

How has the new job changed your involvement/activity at home and with your friends? (Time, Money, Distance) How is your life (components as indicated above) different now with regards to your new job versus your old job?



Do you think the new job is better than the old one or that the old job is better than the new job? Why?

Which situation are you more comfortable/at ease with? (less stress/strain & more enjoyable and productive for you)

What components of your life or, in particular, aspects of your job would you like changed? Why & how?

What kinds of jobs would you ideally like to have?

What kinds of jobs do you think you can get? & Why?

How long do you think you'll work for?